### Summary

In hopes of understanding and ending Loki’s villainy, Thor seeks to bind the silver-tongued God of Lies with Wonder Woman’s golden lasso of truth.

Meanwhile Nick Fury, Batman, Amanda Waller and Mycroft Holmes start a secret clubhouse.

### Notes

As is necessary when writing in comic book fandoms, I have picked and chosen what canon to use. For Marvel, I adhered as strictly as possible to the movie canon, using details from the comics as they were useful. For the DCU, I used a lot of the Justice League animated series canon. My take on Wonder Woman is heavily influenced by George Perez’s version of her from the 1980’s. As for other DCU and Marvel canon, Norse culture, and Norse mythology, I used what suited the story and discarded what didn’t. I added a slight BBC Sherlock
crossover mainly because I think Pepper and Anthea would get along like a house on fire. I CANON WHAT I WANT.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

When Superman and Thor entered the prison cell, the god of mischief was lying on his back on the floor, his head propped on a pillow and Mjölnir on his chest. His expression was sulky as usual when he was subjected to this form of restraint. He was using the mighty weapon as a stand to prop up the book he was reading, one of the *Harry Potter* series.

"Haven't you read that one already?" Superman asked.

"Be silent, Kal-El. I haven't had anything decent to read in three days. That giantess Barda grew angry and refused me anything but *Twilight*."

"You should refrain from baiting your jailors, brother."

"And if you will still call me brother, you should protect me from such atrocities. Isn't merciful treatment of prisoners supposed to be one difference between heroes like you and villains like me?"

Thor did not try to bandy words. How could he fight Loki with Loki's weapons? Instead he reached out and Mjölnir came obediently to his hand. Loki gave a pained grunt, probably more for show than anything else, as he sat up. Superman planted his feet apart and watched Loki alertly.

Loki had proven himself a master of escape in the years since the Chitauri invasion. Only Mjölnir could keep him in place, and when it was lifted from him so that he could eat and bathe, one of Earth's strongest heroes had to be present to guard him. Attempting to restrain him with magic only meant that he and the practitioner would battle until Loki found a way to prevail, frequently causing a great deal of damage along the way. The Raft was one of the few superprisons able to hold Loki in even for a few months. Ways of neutralizing most of its inmates' powers had been found, but Loki's magic, a hybrid of Asgardian and Jotun with more varieties being added to his repertoire with each passing year, was not well enough known to them to completely tame, so brute strength was the only recourse. It was a ridiculous use of the time of such heroes as Superman, Big Barda, or Hercules, but they had found no other way. Even so, a year ago he had escaped the Raft after a mere three months of imprisonment. He had run free until the previous week, when he had used his sceptre - repaired and now unlinked to any other power source - to seize control of Superman's mind. After the Justice League had finished combating the Kryptonian, they had been in no mood for nonsense, and Loki had found himself on the Raft again in short order.

Tony Stark's face appeared on the viewing screen. Inmates of the Raft were constantly monitored, but they also could see who was monitoring them. "Thor? Fury's on the commlink, wants to yell at you about something, plus I need to make some adjustments to the computer system in Loki's cell. Can you come out?"

Superman closed a hand around Loki's elbow. Loki smiled at him. The smile would have been easy, friendly, if not for the deep jagged scars where his lips had been sewn shut on Asgard after the attempted Chitauri invasion.

"No hard feelings, Kal-El? All of the other supervillains have had their turns at mind-controlling you, I merely did not wish to be left out. I had to earn my secret decoder ring, you understand."

Superman glared at him, saying nothing. Loki regarded his iron grip - no, a thousand times stronger than iron - with urbane amusement. He always contrived to give the impression that any restraint placed upon him only worked for so long as he allowed it to. Sometimes, this was true. Loki grinned at Superman as Thor went through the inner set of thick mechanized doors. Thor had to wait a full
minute in the small vestibule after the inner doors clanged shut before the outer ones opened, releasing him and allowing Tony to enter. A minute later, Tony was admitted to the cell. Only when both sets of doors were in place again did Superman release Loki's arm.

Released, Loki stretched and took his book to the table, sitting down to eat while Tony got out a few tools, opened a panel in the wall (after the last escape, the panels were all made of thick layers of steel sealed by electronic locks) and started messing with wires and memory cards. Superman watched Loki for a few moments and finally broke the silence. "He still thinks of you as his brother, you know. He never calls you anything else."

Loki ignored him.

"I was adopted too, you know. By members of a different species from my own, even. I didn't find out I wasn't human until I was almost an adult."

Loki turned a page. "And of course, human children grow up terrified of Kryptonians under their beds."

"Yeah, yeah," Tony said from his spot by the door, adding a new data card and wiring it in. "Daddy loved your brother best. Get in line. My daddy didn't love me at all, I don't think."

Thor's voice emerged from the screen. "I am returning." Superman gripped Loki's arm again, considerately seizing the left one so that Loki could eat unimpeded. Loki ignored him some more.

"Sure, bud, we're ready," Tony said to the screen, then resumed, "Then there's my boyfriend, who had a perfect daddy and a perfect mommy, who were both inconsiderate enough to die horribly when he was a kid. You could search all the 'Nine Realms' and find maybe a hundred sentient beings without parent issues. The only thing unique about yours is that most of us manage to cope without killing hundreds of people or attempting to conquer planets."

"You think I seek power out of sibling rivalry?" Loki looked disgusted. "You pathetic creatures could not even begin to understand the aims of an Asgardian. It is impudent for you to even try."

Tony saw the opening and took it. "But you're not an Asgardian, now are you?"

Loki's eyes blazed. Superman spoke up quickly. "Sure he is. Just like I'm an American, and an, uh, Earthling. No child was ever adopted by accident. You shouldn't feel that your bond with your family or your culture is any less just because they don't share your DNA. I don't."

The inner doors opened and Thor stepped in. Loki looked up at Superman. In the most sincere of tones, he said, "You remind me of Thor." He waited until Superman began to smile just a little bit before adding, "He is a fool, too."

Superman's smile widened as he released Loki's arm. "Somehow, I don't feel very insulted."

The mad god snorted as he returned to his food and his reading. Tony's eyes flickered to the book. "Gryffindors, what can you do?"

Loki looked at him, his expression coolly curious. "What do you do? Nearly all superheroes are Gryffindors. Don't they drive you mad? Though I grant you've pulled a clever trick, convincing them all that you're one of them. Rather Slytherin-ish for a Ravenclaw."

"What are griffin doors?" Thor asked.

"People with more courage than sense," Loki replied, bending his head back to his book.
"Ah. Like me." Thor was unoffended. It wasn't as if Loki's opinion of him was unfamiliar. Loki had considered him excessively brave and sometimes dimwitted even when he still loved him.

"And most of your allies."

Tony spoke again. "I wouldn't call life choices that end up with you on the Raft with the Croquet Mallet of Doom on your chest 'sensible'."

Loki smiled at Mjölnir as if he shared a secret with it. "A god has to come to my chamber every time I eat a meal or take a bath, the mightiest heroes of Midgard stand by in attendance, and I have a genius billionaire performing maintenance on my electronics. No king of Asgard has ever received such honors."

"Yeah." Tony put the door back on the panel and locked it. "You beat your big brother. Congratulations. The genius billionaire has just magnified the sensitivity of the receptors in this room by approximately five hundred percent. If your magic is in any way perceptible by physical means, we will know when you're doing something." He put the last of his tools back into his pocket. "I also added some AC/DC tracks, so I think I'm being pretty humane."

Loki looked at him, thoughtful. "Perhaps you could ask your boyfriend for some advice on handling... 'parent issues'. Mr. Wayne does it so very well, don't you think?" Superman's fists clenched as Loki continued. "No violence, no obsessive behavior, nothing at all like you and me."

Tony locked eyes with him coldly. "I also added 'I Hope You Dance'."

"And they call me a monster."

Stark started the syrupy song playing and exited the inner door. Loki looked daggers after him until Superman said, "I like that song," and then Loki and Stark both laughed, the laughter startled out of Loki before he could suppress it and scowl. Superman looked a little hurt, but Thor was painfully glad to see honest amusement on his brother's face.

With Tony gone and Superman's death grip off him again, Loki pushed his empty plate away, stood, and stretched his arms - slowly, so that the watching heroes would not think he was working magic.

Thor went to stand before his brother. He found that he had to deliberately stop himself a few inches away from him. Even after all that had happened since Loki had learned that he was a Jotun, it still would have been so easy to step right into his arms, to mold his body to Loki's which fitted it so well, to drown in those wide green eyes which saw everything of him, knew him so perfectly. "Loki. Last month you rescued Hawkeye and Black Widow from certain death at the hands of Viper. Why?"

Loki looked at him with his most earnest expression. The one he'd worn when they were children and he had put a snake in Thor's bed. Not that Thor was afraid of snakes as a boy. Not very. They were just repulsive. Not frightening at all. "There was red in my ledger. I wanted to wipe it out."

"What are you talking about?"

"I owed Viper a debt. She betrayed me. She has now learned not to trifle with me."

"Tell me the truth!"

"The truth is that it's more fun to keep people guessing." Loki was running his bath now, shucking his clothes as if he didn't care that two people were watching him. Well, one person; Thor was the one to look away. He knew his brother; he was quite certain Loki hated the lack of privacy, however nonchalant his demeanour. "This must be an unusual experience for you, Kal-El," Loki remarked.
Superman took the bait, warily. "What?"

"Not being able to lift something." Loki nodded indifferently toward Mjölnir as he stepped into the tub.

Superman glanced at it. "I haven't actually tried. Bad superhero etiquette, handling each other's special weapons."

"You are welcome to try, Kal-El," Thor said at once, sportingly as if they were on the practice fields of Asgard. "I confess I am curious to see if your Kryptonian might is a match for Asgardian magic." He plunked the hammer on the floor.

Superman grasped the handle in one hand and pulled. Nothing. His eyes widened with surprise and he added his other hand. Mjölnir did not move at all.

"Amazing!"

Thor laughed and clapped Superman's shoulder good-naturedly. "A fine attempt, Kal-El. Now you may sympathize with the humans more."

The sound of Loki's laughter, soft at first and quickly growing loud and wild, interrupted them. Superman looked at Thor, wondering if he had missed something.

Loki gasped in a breath. "Son of Jor-El, you are *unworthy!*" he cried, and then was laughing so hard he could speak no further.

The two heroes watched him for a long minute. "Kal-El, I would speak with my brother," Thor said at last.

"I'll be right in the vestibule," Superman said, and stepped out.

Thor waited until Loki's laughter had subsided before speaking.

"Loki. What have you done to Jane Foster?"

Loki looked at him, that old penetrating look that seemed to dissect everything Thor might have wished to hide, his right eyebrow rising slightly. Seeing that familiar expression hurt more than being blasted by Loki's sceptre. "Who?" Loki asked, though of course he knew perfectly well who Jane Foster was. "Oh, yes, your Earth concubine. You still have that one?"

"She has left me. Did you threaten her?"

Loki snorted softly. "If you really thought that I had, you would be tearing me limb from limb this very moment."

"But you did something. Said something to her. What?"

"Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"She refuses to speak with me," Thor admitted. "Did you tell her we were lovers?"

"That would be far too easy."

"You know that on Midgard they regard it as among the worst of abominations for siblings to lie together. My fellow Avengers were shocked to learn of it, and they warned me not to speak of it on Earth."
Loki gave a slow, glittering smile. "I know. Perhaps I should tell one of their journalists about it. It would be amusing to see what the mortals thought of their hero then. I wonder, how many of them would turn against you? A few would tolerate our alien customs out of gratitude to you, but how many of them would despise you?"

Thor tried to stay impassive, but something must have shown on his face, because Loki scented blood and moved in for the kill. He started with a tone of sympathetic concern which did not fool Thor for one instant. "If the humans find out, just think of how they will shriek. Every one of their newspapers and television shows and websites will be howling over it, and they will scramble over each other to denounce you. They will ask if you should be allowed even to stay on this planet, a dashing hero admired by children who engages in the most sinful of lusts. You must be sent away lest every youth on Midgard start indulging in similar unnatural passions." His voice became hissing and intense, more rapid with every sentence. "If you remain, every time you risk your idiot neck to rescue one of their pitiful larvae, its parents will snatch it away from you for fear your mere proximity will infect it with your perversion. Nothing you can do will ever be enough to make up for being what you are. No matter how great their debt to you, the humans will spit upon you."

Loki's voice dropped even lower, twisting the knife. "And think how Jane Foster will shrink from you in disgust, knowing she had allowed a filthy deviant to touch her, wondering what was wrong with her that a pervert like you wanted her, wondering why she didn't see you for the freak you are in the eyes of Midgard!"

Loki's eyes were enormous, pupils blown, panting for breath as if the words had been a tremendous effort. Thor felt every word like a lash. Loki was right, Thor knew it. Even the Avengers, who accepted him as a comrade in arms, were still appalled by what they knew. Thor thought for a few seconds, then lifted his chin.

"I will tell them myself, if their disapproval will make you feel recompense for the wrongs you feel I have done you. Say the word and I will tell them all."

Loki looked furious. "You would, wouldn't you? You are idiotically honorable. It must make life so difficult." His eyes gleamed hungrily. "It is a tantalizing idea. You offer because you cannot possibly imagine what it will be like. You who are so used to being loved and admired and envied by all, you cannot even conceive of how all that contempt and disgust will feel. I can. I assure you, Odinson, that you would rather be a guest of Thanos. Are you still willing to tell all Midgard?"

"Yes." Thor's voice held no doubt. "If you wish it."

Loki gave him the most poisonous glare of their lives. For a moment, Thor thought Loki was going to fly at him, attack him, but Loki snarled and tore his gaze away. "I do not wish it. When I destroy you, it will not be by playing on alien customs that have nothing to do with us."

Thor came to sit beside the tub, even though it meant he could not avoid seeing the scars that covered Loki's body, the legacy of Thanos. His brother looked so different from the man he remembered. He looked much older, a change that should have taken centuries for their kind. On Asgard he had kept his hair short, not even reaching his shoulders, and carefully combed back. Thor had used to rumple it sometimes, partly as his brotherly duty of periodically annoying him, partly because he liked the way Loki looked with his hair mussed. Nowadays Loki wore it long and unkempt; aside from washing it, he did nothing to keep the neat appearance he had used to maintain. Thor wasn't certain if he just didn't care anymore or if it was calculated to make his appearance more alarming. He held himself differently. In the past he had been controlled, careful, soft-spoken. Now he sprawled, flinging his arms about carelessly, taking up as much room as he could. It had to be deliberate, surely.
"Brother-

"Stop calling me that," Loki snapped.

"Never."

The answer was another glare.

When it became clear that Loki was not going to speak again, Thor began the words he had prepared. "Brother... I am sorry."

"For what this time?" Loki's face gave away nothing.

Thor hoped he was choosing the right words. He never ceased hoping that somehow he would find the magic combination which would restore the brother he had lost to him. "For not understanding. I knew you were envious of me, but I had no idea how it wounded you, always being the second favorite son, having me value you at less than your true worth."

Loki's face was stony, but his right eyebrow gave another tiny involuntary quirk. Thor noticed it and took heart. In childhood Thor had learned to watch for that as the unfailing sign of emotion. It had always been Loki's only tell.

"When our father banished me for dragging us into Jotunheim, it was my first hint of how you must have felt for years. And then when you told me that he was dead and our mother had forbidden my return... and then when you..."

"Tried to kill you?" Loki supplied helpfully, with a flash of a grin, when Thor paused.

"Yes. Never had I felt rejection from my family before. And I reproach myself endlessly for having inflicted such pain upon you, now that I have had a taste of it."

Loki's eyes glittered at him, and then he was out of the tub, toweling himself off roughly. He said only one word. "Good."

"What would it take to make you forgive me, Loki?"

"Oh, poor Odinson." Loki's eyes were pitying, mocking. "Has it never occurred to you that I am not doing this because of you?"
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Tony Stark takes Thor for a ride, we find out who's on top, and Nick Fury has a plan.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So what did the cyclops want?" Tony asked as Thor folded himself into Tony's red-and-gold Lamborghini. They had taken one of Tony's helicopters from the Raft to the mainland. Thor felt like a bird with broken wings, forced to walk or ride everywhere because Mjölnir was busy keeping his brother from causing trouble.

"Fury? He wants me go to SHIELD headquarters now. Would you-"

"Sure thing. Any details? Do the rest of the Avengers need to suit up?"

"I think he wishes to ask me more questions about my brother."

"Gotta suck, your superweapon spending all its time as a paperweight."

"Yes."

Tony's fingers tapped on the steering wheel to some music in his head, if the noise he listened to could be called music. (To Thor's surprise, Loki seemed to like it as well.) The silence stretched for a few moments before Tony spoke. "I know you get sick of hearing this, but I need to ask you something about Loki, too."

"I do not get sick of it. Please, go ahead."

"Back before his, ah, fall from grace. Did Loki make a habit of telling people's secrets?"

"A habit? No. He did so on one occasion I can recall, in retaliation when someone told an embarrassing story from Loki's youth at a feast. Everyone who ridiculed him had their own most shameful secrets laid bare."

"An embarrassing story about Public Enemy Number One? Do tell."

Thor grinned. "I cannot. I swore an oath that I never would."

"Don't suppose there's any loopholes? If I get you drunk enough will you tell me?"

"This was an oath to Loki. Do you truly believe he would leave loopholes?"

Tony snorted. "Guess not. Too bad you're such a Boy Scout. So, you're saying that telling people's secrets wasn't his preferred form of mischief?"

"No. I think... I think he liked to hoard secrets for himself, rather than share them. When he had secrets about me, he might use them against me between us, but I never worried that he might tell anyone else. He could have...." Thor's voice trailed off.
Tony glanced at him sharply. "Could have what?"

It was a long minute before Thor found an answer. "Embarrassed me."

Abruptly Tony pulled into the parking lot of a fast food joint and went through the drive-through. He ordered gloriously greasy, salty food for both of them and then pulled into a parking space instead of driving on. Sharing junk food in such a small environment created an illusion of intimacy, as Tony had clearly intended. He spoke without his usual flippant tone.

"I wanted to ask you about this away from Fury and the other Avengers, because I have a particular reason for wanting to know. So, level. What do you mean, he could have embarrassed you? I thought on Asgard nobody cares if men bang men or brothers bang brothers?"

Thor examined his cheeseburger (one of Midgard's finest inventions) intently. When he finished chewing he said firmly, "It is a private matter, Stark."

Tony dropped his little bag of fries back into the sack and turned in his seat to face Thor. "I'm not asking this out of morbid curiosity about Norse gods committing incest. Fuck, I don't care if your family reunions are drunken orgies and the barnyard animals join in, you're alien fucking deities." He leaned closer to Thor, looking him in the eye. Thor found himself wondering what his brother would have been saying in this situation. Loki had always been much subtler. He would have had Thor telling him everything and thinking it was his own idea. "I think that Loki knows the secret identities of some of our superheroes. Hell, with his powers, maybe all of them. Some of these people are my friends. I want to know what he's likely to do with this information."

One of Midgard's strangest customs was forcing its greatest warriors to hide their true names from the world. Thor hoped fervently that it would one day put this absurdity aside. For now, however, he knew that revealing the true names of warriors could imperil them in many ways.

And as usual when people asked him what his brother was going to do, Thor did not know what to tell them. "I cannot say. But with his sorcery, he may well have learned all of their true names long ago, and he has yet to reveal any."

"Like so much about your brother, that doesn't make sense. Why would a supervillain have this kind of information and not do anything with it? He could ruin the lives of who knows how many of us. Why hasn't he?"

"He also has not told Midgard that he and I were lovers, and you know how your people would react to that. If he wanted me outcast, perhaps even banished from this realm, he had only to say a few words, and he has not." Thor shook his head. "It has ever been difficult to anticipate my brother's plans. On Asgard, sometimes he would pass up easy opportunities to make mischief because they were not enough of a challenge. It would not be out of character for him to keep all the true names secret because he prefers to disrupt the lives of our allies in some more complicated way, just out of the joy of scheming."

"Or maybe he's saving it for a special occasion."

"That is possible," Thor admitted.

"So what do you mean, Loki could have embarrassed you on Asgard and didn't? C'mon, I need information. Friends. Endangered."

Thor was still discomfited, but he knew that these things were seen differently on Midgard. Tony would not judge him for this as they would have back on Asgard. Of the Avengers, Tony had been
the only one who seemed unaffronted on learning that Thor and Loki had broken the powerful Midgardian taboo against incest. He had only ever shown surprise, with a bit of salacious amusement, and then concern that Thor might be censured in this realm if it were known. And then more salacious amusement.

"I have told you that on Asgard no one counts it a shame for warriors to lie with other men. But there is... a bit of shame, or at least lower status, in...." He tried to find a way to phrase it that was not too vulgar.

"In not being on top?" Tony guessed, eyebrows raised.

"How did you know?" Thor was fairly certain he knew what Tony's euphemism meant. There was a very similar one on Asgard.

"We aren't entirely free of that attitude ourselves here on 'Midgard'."

"Well. Loki would sometimes tease me that he would tell my friends or the court that it was not always he who lay beneath me."

As Thor had expected, Tony did not laugh at him, no contempt flickered in his eyes. He looked only curious. "What would have happened if he had?"

"I would have been taunted, and would have had to fight duels over the taunts or be dishonored. There is an unpleasant word in our language - *ergi*. It means a man who engages in unmanly behavior."

"So *ergi* is basically Asgardian for faggot?"

Thor nodded. "It is very serious. On Asgard, if you call a man that he has the right to challenge you to holmgang - a duel - and kill you."

"Didn't Loki ever get called that?"

"Yes. And he challenged them to holmgang, and killed them."

"...Oh." Tony contemplated this for a moment, squirting more oversugared ketchup onto his fries. "Any idea how many duels he had over that?"

Thor tried to remember. "At least a hundred. When he was a young man he had to fight often, but after his first dozen or so kills men were less ready to challenge him."

"Shit. No wonder he was so touchy about my little quip about performance issues."

Thor wasn't quite sure what Tony meant by that, but he rallied to his brother's defense from habit. "I advise against impugning my brother's masculinity. He may be a sorcerer and beardless and have lain beneath me, but he has successfully demonstrated his manhood many times over, in many duels and battles. And I think he is only beardless because the Jotnar have no beards. I am a better warrior than he, but his own martial prowess is quite-"

"Dude, he defenestrated me, you don't have to convince me. Wait. Wait. What does sorcery have to do with it?"

"There is no shame in sorcery, of course, but it is the domain of women." Thor thought he was stating the obvious, but at Tony's look he added, "Is it not so on Midgard?"
"No, it is not so on Midgard." Tony thought for a second. "But didn't you say your father practices magic too?"

"Yes, but he is a great warrior and a king, so no one could doubt his manhood." Thor struggled to put into words the assumptions he had grown up with. "Engaging in women's work such as sorcery is... less respectable than the manly arts of war."

"Shit. Kind of explains a lot."

"Does it?" Thor didn't see how.

Tony was thinking, obviously looking for the right question to ask. "I suppose everyone naturally assumed you were always on top."

"I was the elder, the crown prince, and the better warrior. Loki was a sorcerer and the younger. It was expected, not counted a shame to him when my prowess as a fighter was so well known. But had anyone ever learned that on occasion I lay beneath him, the gossip would have been merciless."

"But he never did tell?"

"No. Sometimes he would give me a particular sly smile for the amusement of watching me turn red. But he never even hinted about our secret in front of others."

Tony finished off his fries as he considered that. Abruptly he gave a little nod. "Of course he didn't. He didn't want you to lose status."

"Of course he-"

"No, I mean, you were his prize. He was dating the most eligible bachelor on Mount Olympus. Of course he wanted everybody wanting and admiring you and envying him for having you. Last thing he would've wanted was for anything to tarnish his trophy, even himself."

Thor did not like this, mainly because now that Stark had laid it out, he could plainly see that it was true. Of course Loki had had his own self-serving reasons for not humiliating him. But Tony could not know that that was not all of it. He had not seen Loki helping Thor with his lessons throughout their childhood - even when they were small, Loki had always been the clever one. Tony had not seen Loki showing off a new spell to him, or Loki watching Thor spar on the training fields with gleaming eyes. He had not heard them calling each other chicken and cow over their helmets. He had not heard Loki patiently and uselessly trying, over and over, to advise him to act with caution and strategy. He had not seen them fighting back to back in Nornheim, Alfheim, Svartálfaheim, Jotunheim. He had not seen them in the aftermath of battle or tournament, hurrying to whatever privacy was to be had, brutally fucking each other still in their armor, still covered with sweat and blood. No. Even Loki Liesmith could not fake loving someone for centuries. It was only that Loki never had just one reason for anything he did.

Tony broke into the thoughtful silence that had fallen. "Well. I'm glad we mostly got over that here. I would get bored if Bruce and I always did it the same way."

After a few seconds of embarrassed surprise, Thor realized that Tony was trying to assure him that he had not lost his esteem by offering the reciprocal confidence, that he too sometimes laid beneath a man who was his inferior in battle. Something else slipped into place as well. Thor had not understood why his brother had been taunting Stark about his lover. Perhaps Loki somehow knew that Tony at least sometimes lay beneath Bruce Wayne, something which Thor would not have expected; Wayne was no warrior. Indeed, Thor did not consider him worthy of Tony at all, though it
was not his place to tell Tony so. But Midgard had its own convoluted set of rules, and the ones to which Thor was accustomed did not consistently apply.

Aloud Thor said, "I do not think this is useful to you. I see no parallel with your situation. Would being the only villain to know the true names of heroes give my brother any tactical advantage?"

"Not that I can see," Tony admitted reluctantly. "Not unless he started targeting people's families, which he hasn't done so far. Or maybe if he intended to barter this information to other villains. And advertising that he had this kind of information would be like putting a bull's-eye on his own forehead; every Big Bad in Midgard would be lining up to torture the information out of him."

Something more to worry about. "What makes you think he knows the true names of heroes?"

Tony airily waved his mini-pie, made of excessively sweet chemicals with as little actual fruit in it as possible. "A few hints he's made to me. Just messing with my head, as usual."

"He may never intend to do anything with this information except tease you and other heroes about it. He is quite capable of doing that for centuries."

Tony nodded. "Sorry not to be more specific, but you know. The fewer people who know, the better, and you're not exactly the cloak-and-dagger type."

"I wear a cloak and am never without at least two daggers."

Tony chuckled and explained, "That's an expression meaning spy type activity. Like what Natasha did. Secretive. I don't think keeping secrets is your best skill."

Perhaps it was the unusual chance to talk unguarded that sparked a bit of Loki's brand of mischief in Thor. Instead of replying, he gave Tony a sidelong glance and his best imitation of Loki's sly smile, the one intended to drive people crazy wondering what he knew about them.

Tony cracked up and had to jam one of the flimsy paper napkins over his mouth not to spew bits of pie everywhere. They both kept laughing for a minute, more than the little jest deserved, for the joy of having something to laugh about in their lives of fear and battle. Catching his breath, Tony said, "I guess I don't need to ask who you learned that look from. That expression is so un-Thor-like that for a second I thought you were possessed."

Thor was still grinning. He had many allies and friends on Midgard, but few with whom he could share a laugh like this. Clint and Natasha were too grim, Bruce Banner too quiet, Steve too constantly appalled at the strange new world he had awakened in. Tony was unshockable and took nothing very seriously.

"Of all the men on Midgard, Tony Stark, you are the most like a brother to me," Thor told him warmly.

"That's flattering, Thor, but I'm already taken," Tony retorted.

Thor gave his shoulder a playful punch, careful not to harm his fragile human frame. Even so, Tony said, "Ow! Careful with us puny mortals, Conan," as he swung the car back into traffic.
Thor was shown to Fury's private office as soon as he arrived. This was a surprise; Fury was seldom in this room, preferring to be striding about headquarters, observing, supervising, talking to his agents. He liked to be in the thick of things.

"As you've probably guessed, this is about your brother."

Thor nodded. These days, it was always about his brother. Now who was in whose shadow?

"A big part of the reason he causes us so much trouble is that most of the time we have no idea what he's after. A lot of supervillains, they show up, we pretty much know their habits. The Joker is going to get as much attention as Batman can give him. Catwoman is gonna steal cat-themed shit. The Wrecking Crew is gonna wreck stuff. Your brother, we got no clue what the hell he's gonna do."

"I am eager to help both you and my brother, Director Fury, but I also have no clue about him."

"Actually, you do. You have plenty of clues about him, you just don't know what do to with them. That is what I want to talk to you about. But first of all, you need to understand that the details of this debriefing are going to be top secret. Not to be revealed even to your fellow Avengers."

Stark was right, secretiveness was not his strong suit. Oh, he would endure horrific torture before speaking of any secret, but his nature was too honest for him to always evade clever conversational traps laid to make him reveal that a secret was there to be known. Loki had gotten information out of him that way many times over the years.

Thor said as much. Fury nodded. "I'm aware of that. But Loki doesn't have any more discreet brothers hanging around who we can question, so you're it."

Thor found that he was absently tracing the symbol of Loki's helmet on his vambraces. He had worn them since Loki had fallen from the Bifrost, the traditional mourning of a warrior. Later, a year or so into Loki's career of supervillainy, Loki had mentioned it once when they had met in combat. "You have noticed that I am still alive, have you not, Odinson?"

"I am still mourning you," Thor had answered quietly. For a fleeting second, Loki's scornful expression had faltered, and then he had blasted, not Thor himself, but the brick wall he was standing near, so that the rubble buried him. By the time he had clawed his way out Loki had been gone.

Thor forced his fingers to still. "If you would allow me to take him to Asgard-"

"We did," Fury reminded him, harsh. "Twice. Both times he got out within a couple of months. We have a better record of keeping him behind bars than you do." Fury shook his head. "Your father turned you into a regular human when he sent you here a few years ago, why doesn't he do that to Loki?"

"Because he cannot. He tried." That had been a harrowing day. It was at the beginning of Loki's second, short-lived captivity on Asgard. Loki had been pale and shaking with terror, but had refused to say a word to ask for mercy. Apparently Loki could only do so as part of a trick; when the danger was real, he was too proud. Thor had felt guiltily relieved when Odin's magic had proven useless to strip Loki of his powers. "He could take away my powers because I am of Asgard. Loki is a Jotun, my father's magic does not extend to that." At Fury's look, Thor went on, "I do not understand how it works, I never have. I am no sorcerer."

"If your father could and would turn Loki into a powerless human, we would be happy to turn him over, but since you say he can't, we're going to deal with him ourselves as best we can. But we want your help."
"Tell me what I can do."

"You can share everything you know about Loki. Not with SHIELD, but with me and a few other people of various affiliations. People with good strategic minds. You won't even meet all of us - the very existence of this group is highly confidential - but we will share whatever information you can give us about your brother among ourselves and see if we can figure out his game. We've been studying all of the data we have on him for a while now and putting our heads together. In a way, your brother did us a favor. We started this little brain trust trying to anticipate Loki's schemes. But since we began, we've been able to coordinate on some other major players as well."

"And these people, they have the authority to then do something about it if they do comprehend his designs?"

"They do. These people represent the US and UK governments, SHIELD of course, the Justice League... among other powers."

"And you believe that they can divine Loki's strategy? My brother is clever as well as devious."

"If anyone can. Put it this way: Batman is one of us."

Thor nodded thoughtfully. He had never met Batman himself, but all of Midgard's heroes spoke of him with great respect for his intellect as well as his martial prowess. "Do you know... I do not believe my brother has ever caused any trouble in Gotham."

"I'd say that's a smart move on his part. And an encouraging sign for us. So, what I am asking is for you to spend a few days telling us everything you can about him, about his life on Asgard, anything that might help us understand him."

This seemed to be a day for embarrassing confidences. "You say this project is 'top secret'."

Fury understood. "Your family secrets will be safe with us. Nothing you tell us will go any further."

Maybe it was too much time in recent years spent trying to follow Loki's thoughts, but Thor was skeptical about that. Well, he would make up his own mind about what to tell the people on this project. He wasn't going to tell them that he and his brother had been lovers. They would never see past their own taboos, no matter how he tried to explain to them that Asgardians did not subscribe to them. And there was other information that could, however slightly, compromise the security of Asgard. He could not tell them of Loki using the Casket of Ancient Winters because if the humans knew about the things in Asgard's weapons vault, they would exhaust themselves trying to either steal or duplicate them. And he had seen too much of humans to be entirely sure that they would fail. Humans seemed to be and often were insignificant creatures, but one underestimated them at one's own peril. They had a way of surprising one.

Thor felt distaste at the whole idea. He preferred honorable dealings with fellow warriors, with no secrets or misdirection. But his duty - to Asgard, to Loki, to Midgard, to the Avengers - required him to go against his own nature in this.

This was exactly what Loki had spent years trying to teach him against the day he would be king. Thor wondered if he would care that he had finally, after such extravagant lengths, succeeded.

Deliberately he put aside these grave thoughts and clasped Fury's wrist, Asgardian warrior fashion. "Of course I will tell these wise men anything that might be of use to them, Fury."

"They're not all men. Anyway. Tomorrow morning when you get back from the Raft, Agent Coulson will be waiting for you with a car."
Chapter End Notes

On my tumblr I wrote a bit of meta about beards in Asgardian culture. It's really very odd that Loki doesn't have one, and he definitely would have gotten crap about it.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Thor tells Fury's shadowy brain trust everything he knows about Loki... almost. What happened on Asgard after the Chitauri invasion of Earth. The sewing of Loki's lips. How a Norse god courts his brother. Loki's career of villainy. No one kills my big brother but me.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Besides Fury and Batman, the other members of this nebulous group present were Amanda Waller, a formidable woman who had some kind of government position about which Fury was vague - Thor took the hint to stop asking about it - and Mycroft Holmes, a British civil servant who Thor recognized with surprise as the employer of Pepper's girlfriend Anthea. Thor had learned enough discretion not to comment, but he knew Anthea, had seen that her capabilities of organization and resourcefulness were equal to Pepper's. The man who employed her had to wield great power indeed, regardless of how humble he pretended his position to be.

"Make yourself comfortable, Thor," Fury ordered. The command was impossible to follow in the flimsy chairs provided, but Thor did not comment. "We're gonna be here for a while. As long as it takes. Thor, all of us have reviewed your report of the Chitauri invasion and we believe the conclusions you Asgardians drew about it are correct. However, we would appreciate it if you would tell us about it again. See if we can get any additional details."

Thor nodded and began. He hated telling this story, but it wasn't as if he could ever escape thoughts of it.

When the Chitauri battle was done, Loki had sat quietly while Thor chained him, even holding up his wrists to make the task easier. After Stark had given him the drink he requested (a current form of Midgardian chivalry, it seemed), Thor had brought out the muzzle Odin had provided along with the chains. Loki had finally shown some reaction on seeing it, a flash of alarm and anger, tension to resist coiling in his limbs. Thor had steeled himself to force it on him, but their eyes had met for an instant and Loki had reined himself in, had compelled his muscles to relax, surrendering to his fate. Still wary, Thor had approached. When he was a few inches away, Loki had struck rapidly as a snake - snatching the muzzle from Thor's hands and defiantly putting it on himself before Thor could react.

He had made no resistance to their return to Asgard. Their parents had been waiting for them. Frigga had embraced Loki at once, and he had squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his face into her hair, returning the embrace as much as the chain would allow. When she had finally released him to embrace her other son, Loki was left to face their father.

Odin had stood regarding him, not approaching. Loki had kept his eyes firmly on the floor, his jaw clamped. After visibly struggling with himself a moment, Loki fell to one knee, but still would not glance up even for the barest instant.
Full of trepidation, Thor had watched over his mother's head. Odin had admitted his error and his remorse often over the year Loki had been gone. Even so, Thor feared that now he would compound that error.

When Loki would not look at Odin, would not let him see the pleading he would not have been able to restrain, Odin stepped to him. "Loki Odinson, you will be judged by the Thing," he began. The moment the name was pronounced, it seemed that Loki lost the last of his will to resist; he crumpled to the floor and did not move again.

Thor knew his brother too well, had seen too much in the past two days, to be confident that the collapse was real, but it did seem to be as they hurriedly gathered around him. Odin touched Loki's face and ordered, "Thor, take your brother to the healing room. Now!"

Thor had lifted Loki in his arms, remaining wary of any trick, but none came. In the healing room the healers had begun their examination. Odin left after a time; Thor and Frigga stayed by Loki's side. The examination lasted for several hours. It was not until late that Odin returned to hear their findings.

That was the worst day of Thor's millennia-long life. Worse than the day he had been banished. Worse than the day he had thought his father had died because of him. Worse than the day he had had to combat his own brother and seen him fall into the void.

He had believed his brother dead. As it turned out, he had been wildly optimistic.

The damage done by the green berserker was the least of it. Loki's body and spirit showed the signs of prolonged, horrifically creative torture. His body was covered with scars, and given the regenerative capacity of Asgardians (even a frost giant enchanted into Asgardian form, time had shown), the scarring pointed to repeated, deliberate re-infliction of the wounds. A human would have died after a few hours of such treatment. Loki had endured it for over a year. And not only torture of the body; the healers found that foul magics had been used to torture Loki's spirit as well. Thor could not understand how it worked, magic had ever been beyond him, but one of the healers had given him a few seconds of it in illustration and that had been enough to fill Thor's nights with horror. And Thor had not been looking for him, had not come to his rescue, Loki had been entirely alone with those monsters....

Thor had reluctantly left Loki's bedside to discuss the matter with Odin and the Thing. Loki still seemed insensible, but with the evidence of his scars they were able to piece together what had happened. After falling into the Void, Loki had ended up in the clutches of Thanos. In those torture chambers, unable to die, he had formed a desperate and cunning plan: to offer Thanos the power of the Tesseract in return for a conquering army. He had never had the slightest intention of giving it to him, or letting him conquer Midgard. Indeed, he had very carefully planned his own defeat. Given a dozen chances to kill one or another of the Avengers, including Thor himself, he had allowed them all to live. He had begun his "invasion" with small flashy stunts calculated to attract the attention of Midgard's heroes and gather them together, preparing them to fight. Once the Avengers had obligingly destroyed his army and the sceptre with which Thanos had maintained his sorcerous link to him, Loki had wanted to be taken to Asgard. What corner of the universe would be safer from the vengeance of Thanos? Thor had felt like a fool, dragging his brother back in chains to precisely where he had wanted to be.

Still, what Loki had done required some sort of consequence. Asgardian justice tended to be harsh, but tormenting someone who had been through what Loki already had was not to be thought of. The penalty chosen in the end was a largely symbolic one: besides imprisonment, Loki's mouth was to be sewn shut.
This was not done until Loki had physically and spiritually healed. This took a long while, by Asgardian standards; nearly a month of Midgardian time. Thor seldom left his side, sleeping on the floor beside Loki's bed at night, all day sitting, watching him. For most of that time, Loki seldom spoke, and when he did it was disjointed; words like no and stop occurred with disturbing regularity.

One night Thor had awakened to hands fumbling at his tunic. He opened his eyes to find Loki leaning over him, gasping with the pain of movement, his eyes feverish.

He sat and placed his hands over Loki's, restraining him. "Loki, what-

"I stabbed you!" Loki gasped. "Let me see!"

Thor assumed that Loki wanted to gloat over this petty triumph over him, and the thought was like lead in his stomach. Still he pushed Loki's shaking fingers out of the way and pulled his tunic up. The stab had hurt, but it was a trivial wound for an Asgardian. Now there was only a red line of skin still mending, and soon even that would be gone.

Loki put his fingertips over the cut. "You're all right," he stammered, as if trying to reassure himself.

"Of course I am all right." As if that tiny knife could have harmed Thor.

Loki's face crumpled and he broke down into sobs that wracked his entire body. "I'm sorry," he gasped out. "I am so sorry. I didn't want to. I am so sorry."

Painfully relieved, Thor had gathered Loki close to him, held him tightly as Loki cried against his chest. Loki kept repeating those same words, over and over, no matter how many times Thor told him that he knew it, that he knew what had happened, that he forgave him.

Loki was still recovering, still weak. Before long he fell asleep, or perhaps passed out from exhaustion, and Thor held him until morning.

When Loki awoke he was finally lucid, but he seemed oddly uninterested in his own fate. All he would talk about was Thanos and the Chitauri.

"They're coming!" Loki had cried. "For the Tesseract! For me! Tell Father to arm everyone, and get out the Casket, and the Destroyer, and-

Thor had tried to soothe him. The Chitauri had been defeated, and without the Tesseract this Thanos had no way of reaching Asgard, even had he been reckless enough to try. But Loki frantically kept insisting that he would, sitting up in bed even though he was too weak to do so and gripping Thor's shirt and babbling on as Thor tried to make him rest. Eventually, Thor brought Odin to Loki's bedside to hear about it, not because he believed Loki but because he hoped being heard would calm him. Odin had listened for a while, and then told him that he had no need to worry, no one would dare to attack Asgard, in much the same tone with which, when they were children, he had assured both his sons that no frost giants would creep into their rooms at night. (In retrospect, of course, he had been wrong about that in Thor's case.)

Loki was not comforted by this. When he was informed of his sentence he impatiently dismissed the information and kept up his insane warnings instead of weaving a web of silver lies about why his punishment should not be carried out. Even when they came to do the sewing, he did not ask for clemency, only to be heard. "Fine, just listen to me first! I must tell you about him, about his army. He will invade and when he does-

Two guards had held Loki's arms, another yanked his head back by his hair. As if that had been a signal of some sort, Loki had stopped speaking and just waited. The dwarf Brokk had done the
sewing. Loki stared at the ceiling, showing no reaction to anything. Thor, who forced himself to watch every second, began to worry that what was left of his brother's mind might have been broken, but it was too late now.

When it was done, the others left. Thor came to sit beside Loki's bed again. Loki closed his eyes tightly and rolled to show Thor his back. He did not move again that day until finally Thor gave up and left, and on subsequent days he refused to acknowledge Thor's presence. He made no attempt to communicate in any way. When Frigga came to sit with him he would hold her hand and look at her, but no more.

A few months later, Thanos invaded Asgard with the Chitauri. The Valkyries made a great harvest that day, many fine warriors of Asgard fell. Loki was released from his cell to join the battle, and he slaughtered the Chitauri with a bloodlust he had never shown before. Thor had done the same, they all had. Thor was only sorry that he and Loki could not kill every one of them with their own hands.

"You can't kill an entire race, Thor!" Loki had cried to him, mid-battle, laughing insanely. Thor had felt sick; the stitches that had shut his mouth had been cut to ease his magic, but Loki had left the shreds of leather thong dangling horribly from his lips.

"I will spare them if they offer peace!" Thor had flung back, knowing that none of them would. And none of them had, but had fought on until every one of them was dead.

It was Odin, armed with relics which had not been removed from the vault since before Thor was born, who faced Thanos himself. And soundly defeated him with the very prizes he had come to steal. When Thanos had at last been forced to retreat, depleted and furious, Thor had felt certain that one day he would attack them again. It would be far in the future, he would need much time to recover, and he would have to raise a completely new army, but return he would.

When the battle was over, Thor had turned to Loki, to share their triumph, but Loki was gone.

"We considered the possibility that Loki was doing something similar now," Batman was saying in his deep, rasping voice, "but the evidence doesn't support that theory. There were clear signs of a greater villain controlling Loki then - you noticed that yourself at the time, Thor. Now there are none. And while his schemes are sometimes... inefficient, they show no signs of the self-sabotage of the Chitauri invasion."

Thor nodded reluctantly. It had been a slender hope, but his love for his brother had not allowed him to relinquish it.

"We've been working on the premise that he is motivated by jealousy of you," Fury said, "but many of his activities have nothing to do with you. He unleashes chaos on planets you've never visited. If all he wanted was to get under your skin, it seems he would focus on Asgard and Earth, but he doesn't. It seems he would concentrate on your associates, on the Avengers and Dr. Jane Foster, but he doesn't. Thor, you've known him all of his life. What does he want?"

Thor sighed and went over the same reasons he always did. "He wants to be taken seriously. To be seen as something more than my younger brother. He wants power."

"He is going about acquiring it ineffectively," Holmes pointed out. "With his abilities, he could have conquered some less advanced planet easily and lived as its king. He either has a larger plan, or else he is simply insane."
"I've dealt with madmen. I don't think it's that simple," Batman said.

Thor winced. "I think he has been mad since learning he was a Jotun. To a child of Asgard, well, as Iron Man put it, this was finding out that he was a 'bogey-man'. But he was always one for plotting and scheming."

"Supervillainy is a dangerous profession. Your brother's been imprisoned several times and the downside of allying yourself with supervillains is that when things go wrong they tend to try to kill you. Would he really put himself through all that in pursuit of a bigger scheme?" Waller sounded skeptical.

Thor almost laughed. "Of course he would. He has never hesitated to subject himself to pain if he thought it would serve his ends."

One summer when Thor had been a boisterous child, he had discovered the fun of ducking his friends in the lake where they swam when they defied him, or sometimes just to remind them who was boss. As Thor's most constant companion, Loki was singled out for this treatment the most.

Unsurprisingly, Loki grew tired of it. So one day when Thor submerged him, instead of uselessly struggling to escape or striving to hold his breath, Loki had deliberately inhaled a lungful of water. His involuntary convulsions had been clearly different from his usual struggles and the other children had shrieked in alarm. Thor had dragged him out of the water in a panic and pounded his stomach to make him cough up the water. Of course there was no keeping something like that from grownups, and Frigga had been furious with Thor. That had been the end of that particular game. And Loki had been quietly smug every time they had gone swimming for the rest of that summer. Loki could have simply tattled on him, but he had known how much more effective scaring everyone that way would be. The pain of breathing water, the risk of possibly drowning - neither had deterred Loki from his scheme to put an end to Thor's annoying antics.

"Let's review his magical powers again," Waller said. "Think back on everything you ever saw him do back home."

"I will try," Thor said, "but I do not know the full extent of his abilities. He has gained in power in recent years, and he hides his new powers for as long as he can. You remember how he escaped from the Raft a few years ago."

The powerful Martian J'onn J'onz had been on guard duty that day. The Martian could not read Loki's mind against his will, Loki was too good a sorcerer for that. Tony Stark had devised disruptors to reveal Loki's illusions for what they were, and there were several of these in Loki's cell. Loki had found a way around this impediment; while Thor had been conferring with the prison's officials, Loki had bypassed visual illusions and instead manipulated J'onz's telepathy directly, making him see a mirage of Loki in the bathtub while the real Loki strolled behind him and then proceeded to demonstrate that he had trained in combat alongside Thor. The Martian had slumped unconscious to the floor and Loki had followed up with a blast of magic.

Of course the surveillance caught all of this. Security guards ran to position themselves outside Loki's cell and Thor came running with Mjölnir to aid them.
Later Thor had been shown the security footage. The first thing Loki had done once the Martian was down was rip open a panel of the wall with his bare hands, skinning his fingers bloody in the process. For years Loki had shown only bewilderment at all but the simplest functions of electronics, and would sometimes grudgingly ask Thor or his jailors for help making the system play his favorite Midgardian music. Now, his hurried tampering had several false starts before the inner doors to his cell slid open, but his ignorance was revealed as a sham. At some point he had learned how such things worked, and hidden that knowledge until he was ready to use it.

The outer doors would not open to electronic tampering after several tries, and Loki had been forced to blast through them with his magic. This was not an easy task. The thick doors had been built specifically to hold him in. It required time Loki didn't have and a tremendous amount of magical energy. When finally there was enough of an opening for him to step through, he was chalk white and shaking, clutching at the walls to remain upright.

Guards, a dozen of them, awaited him with large guns, and Thor at the front of them. "We will not let you pass, brother," Thor had told him. "Surrender now before I am forced to harm you."

Loki's knees buckled and he sank to the floor, exhausted, looking at them with resignation. He crouched panting while Thor warily approached to take him into custody. A split second before reaching Loki, Thor realized what he was doing, but it was too late. Sure enough, the Loki huddled on the floor was an illusion. Loki's cell had been full of disruptors to prevent him from creating his illusions; they had never thought to put any outside his cell. An oversight they had since corrected.

Meanwhile the real Loki - also horribly pale and trembling, that much had not been an illusion - had appeared behind Thor and seized him. He didn't understand what Loki was doing to him, but a few seconds later he had blacked out.

Thor had awakened a few days later in the hospital, tired but unhurt. They had explained that Loki had replenished his depleted energy by somehow draining Thor's. A week of rest was sufficient to mend him. By Asgardian standards, this was a serious injury.

With Thor's stolen energy in him, Loki had rendered all of the guards unconscious (but not drained) with a wave of his hands and then walked on a few paces, limping and bleeding, before abruptly flickering to invisibility. Then, having displayed numerous unsuspected abilities, Loki had disappeared for two months. After that he had appeared on Muspellheim and wrought considerable havoc there before quitting the scene mere days before Thor's arrival with reinforcements.

"Back on Asgard," Waller asked, "he went into battles with you, right? Did he like that? Like killing?"

Thor shook his head. "I have seen him kill any number of enemy warriors, and of course he fought and won many duels, but I never got the impression that he enjoyed the rage of battle as I did. He was more one for mischief. He would conjure harmless illusions to frighten people, or trick people just for the fun of seeing them fall for it. People did not love him for it, but he rarely harmed anyone."

Batman spoke. He was so still that it was startling every time he did, as if a statue had suddenly come to life. "That isn't entirely inconsistent with his current M.O. He hasn't killed nearly as many people as he could have with his various stunts. His allies cause a lot more damage, even though they seldom have anywhere near as much power as Loki does."
Since escaping from Asgard, Loki had taken mischief to new heights. He did not confine himself to any planet or realm. He would ally himself with various villains - Lex Luthor, Victor von Doom, Ra's al Ghul, the Ultra-Humanite, Kang the Conqueror. He would endow them with artifacts of great power and unleash them to pursue their own ends. Sometimes he would drop out of sight for a few months, only to appear again with an army of some sort - aliens, zombies he raised from the dead himself, robots made by von Doom - and make another clumsy attempt at invasion, always quickly fended off but causing great destruction in the interim.

And then there was that time he had shown up in New York and turned several buildings to candy and a few hundred cars to ice cream, which promptly melted.

Thor sometimes wondered if Loki's purpose was to cause trouble as an end in itself rather than to actually seize power. Loki was no fool, surely his plans would have improved after a few failures. But they didn't.

Loki killed people. Civilians, soldiers. But he did seem to have some remaining scruples. ("Even bad guys have scruples," Fury had told Thor when he had mentioned this once. "They just don't have as many as the rest of us do.") He never performed torture, nor did his occasional allies when they were working with him. Thor thought that Loki's own torment at the hands of Thanos might have given him a revulsion towards performing such horrors himself. A couple of years ago he had stolen back from SHIELD the sceptre Thanos had given him and repaired it, now without any link to any other villain bent on controlling him, but used its power as an energy weapon, not as a tool of mind control. Except for once with Superman, and as he had pointed out, controlling Superman's mind was practically a rite of passage for supervillains. Thor tried not to be hopeful, but it did seem that Loki's villainy had its limits.

Every world on which Loki had made an appearance over the last few years had had to gird itself against him. It wasn't so much the weapons and armies, they had had those already. Rather, with every disaster Loki caused, they prepared themselves better for the next. The procedures of evacuating civilians from danger zones had become more streamlined, and the responses of the various militaries concerned to unfamiliar threats more effective. Not like when the Chitauri had invaded Earth and the authorities of Earth had been unable to think past sacrificing millions of their own. By now they were better able to evaluate a new threat, determine its particular weakness, and respond accordingly.

Loki's victims learned more readily than he did, it seemed.

"Since the Chitauri, Loki has had a number of affairs with other supervillains," Waller was saying, pushing a folder over to Thor. "The most recent we know of was the sorceress Tala, which apparently ended four months ago - since then she's been seen in the company of Lex Luthor and they showed signs of affection. If you can call it that." Thor opened the folder with reluctance. The photo on top was Tala, a striking woman with purple hair and eyes. Then there was a blond man in a trench coat, John Constantine. And a green-robed man with flowing pale hair, Modred the Mystic. After all Loki had done it was foolish to be hurt that he was lying with other men, but there it was.

"His partners show no consistency aside from all being either top ranking criminals or at least highly morally ambiguous, mostly with magical abilities." Holmes's voice was cool, uncompromising. "Men, women, all different physical types. So we have concluded that these affairs are for the purpose of cementing his criminal alliances, or getting close to someone who can teach him more about magic. Thor, what can you tell us about his love life back on Asgard? Is there some pattern we haven't noticed?"
Thor looked at the photos of Loki's lovers somberly. As Waller had said, there was no common theme to them. "I believe you are right, these are alliances cemented by sex, not love affairs. On Asgard, there were many women." There had been many women for both of them, but the women came and went and Thor and Loki remained inseparable, neither of them ever touching any other man. "But all they had in common was that they were pretty. And, often, married to men who had insulted Loki."

There had been a night, long ago, when Thor had gone to Loki only hours after lying with an obliging lady of the court. Loki had broken the first kiss and pushed him away. "You stink of that dreadful perfume. What are you doing here, anyway? If she was so unsatisfactory, you shouldn't have bothered with her."

"You like lying with women too, don't think I don't know about Sigyn or Angrboða or-"

"I do not come to your bed smelling of them. Go take a bath and go to bed. In your chamber."

"Will you not join me?"

"I am going to do the same thing you did, only with someone prettier." And Loki had.

For the next few weeks there was a coolness between the princes. They conversed at meals, they sparred on the practice fields. In most ways it was normal, but it was not enough. After a week Thor gently tendered his farewell to his lady, and he watched the procession of women through Loki's chamber. The younger prince of Asgard might be a lesser prize than the elder in the eyes of the Aesir, but he was still a prince, still handsome, still able to charm the birds out of the trees with his words when he cared to. He had no trouble finding female companionship. Thor, unusually, felt uncertain his own company would be welcome. He put off trying, waiting for some sign.

A few weeks later a tournament had been held. As always, Loki made a respectable showing. As always, Thor triumphed over everyone. After, as they removed their armor, still flush with his victory, Thor had told his brother, "I am going to the baths." It was an indirect way of telling him the message had been understood. He handed his winged helmet to the waiting servant. "Will you come to my chamber later?"

Loki had looked at him and been unable to hold back the slow spread of a wide smile. "Why don't I just accompany you to the baths?"

In the scented water of the bathing pool Thor had taken him against the pool's cold marble wall, and later in Thor's soft bed Loki had straddled him, and they had stayed up most of the night indulging in one variation after another. Weeks apart had sharpened their appetites for each other. And Thor had understood the unspoken lesson: just because they were both men did not mean Thor could neglect the same courtesies he showed his women. Thor did not think that any other man of Asgard would have cared one way or the other, had he taken one as his lover, but Loki had always been different.

After that, he kept any dalliances with females strictly separate, and put a bath and at least one night's sleep between them and Loki. His brother belonged to him, but there were still rules that could not be broken.

"What about male lovers on Asgard?"

Thor wondered if he imagined the challenge in Batman's tone, but quickly concluded that this was
simply one of Batman's tactics, looking as if he already knew all the guilty secrets.

Thor answered with measured honesty only because he knew himself to be a poor liar. That should have been proof centuries ago that he and Loki did not share blood. "There was only one man on Asgard."

They had been lovers for so long Thor could scarcely remember a time when they had not been. As children they had been constant companions, and then Thor had suddenly vaulted past adolescence into early manhood, leaving his brother behind him with gangly coltish limbs and eyes and hands too big for the rest of him. Loki was still his shadow, tagging along on everything he did. Thor ignored him a great deal, absorbed in the new excitement of adulthood, though the affection was still there - indulgent now, as befitted a grown man to his younger brother, but there.

Then one day Loki was a man too, and Thor noticed it. It seemed to him that he had bid good night to a gawky adolescent and been greeted by an elegant young man the next morning. Elegant, graceful, beautiful.

Loki's manner was different too. He still shadowed Thor, but no longer gave the impression of tagging along. No, he was simply there, always composed, always ready with a prank or with some helpful magic, always giving the impression that he found Thor's brashness very amusing.

He gave few signs that he felt anything for Thor besides the condescending affection Thor had shown him in recent years. Thor was his silly elder brother, unscholarly, unmagical, always fighting, not very clever.

Thor set out to impress him.

The only thing that occurred to Thor to do was show off. And show off he did, sparring, fighting, riding, hunting. Loki seemed more amused than impressed, but Thor was too young to think of changing his tactics. He didn't really believe that it wasn't working, and as it happened, he was right.

Later Loki had confessed to having been infatuated with Thor throughout adolescence, while Thor had been cheerfully oblivious. When Thor finally took notice of him, he considered it prudent not to give in right away. When they were alone, or relatively so, Thor would tell him how beautiful he was. Loki would pretend not to care, would scoff at the compliments, but in fact he stored up every word.

"Your eyes are the color of a new leaf today," Thor told him one morning as they had met in the corridor, Thor heading for the training fields, Loki for the library.

Loki had laughed softly as they fell into step. "Very pretty. Did you think of that one yourself?"

"As a matter of fact, I did." Thor had noted that poetry made such comparisons and begun to make mental lists of things to compare the various shades of Loki's eyes to. "Your eyes change color. Sometimes they are the color of moss. Sometimes they are like the sea beneath the Bifrost. Sometimes they are the blue of the first moment of dawn."

His brother's lips had twitched. "So what is it you want? Are you in trouble again? Do you need me to do a spell for you?"

Stung, Thor had stopped, catching Loki's arm. This conversation wasn't going at all as he had planned. "No! I merely...."
The amusement had dropped from Loki's face and those new-leaf eyes had grown watchful.

"You are beautiful," Thor managed, wishing he could think of some more elegant way of saying it. A line from some ballad came to mind and he seized upon it. "You are radiant as the moon."

Now Thor knew he had blundered, because there was a tiny flicker of something cold and hard in Loki's eyes now. "The moon? Why the moon?"

Thor thought frantically. What was wrong with the moon, that anyone could object to being compared to it? He couldn't think of anything. Or was it merely too obvious, what with Loki's pale skin and raven hair? Not clever enough for him?

"Think how dark the night would be without the moon," Thor ventured at last. He wished he had anticipated this, prepared what he was going to say.

Loki lowered his eyes thoughtfully. He seemed surprised, but not at all displeased. Thor felt very relieved; he had not ruined it after all.

"What did you think I was going to say? What could I say that was bad about the moon?"

For that he got the look Loki gave him when he had gone over the same lesson a dozen times and Thor had still forgotten it again. "Did you remember, or did anyone ever bother to tell you, that the moon is not actually radiant?"

Thor frowned. "But it shines."

Loki smiled thinly. "The moon merely reflects the light of the sun." With that he had walked away, leaving Thor confused and disappointed.

"I forgot!" Thor called after him. "Sometimes your eyes are the color of a garden snake!"

This had made Loki look back over his shoulder to grin at him, and Thor thought he had not entirely bungled things. Loki liked snakes, and he had looked amused at that comparison.

After Thor was done with the day's sparring and was sitting in the bathing pool pondering what had gone wrong with the moon compliment, it finally occurred to him that he himself, with his golden hair and sky-colored eyes, might be cast as the sun in that metaphor. He had resolved to avoid symbolism in his compliments from then on. They were perilous when used on someone as clever as Loki.

On another occasion, Thor had gone to the library to find Loki, who had not been seen out of it all day. Loki was so absorbed in what he was reading that he did not notice Thor's approach until Thor was right behind him. Loki slammed the spellbook shut, but Thor had already seen a few words. "You're trying again to grow a beard?"

Loki only snarled at him. He stood and gathered up the books in front of him.

"I heard," Thor told him. "You killed Egil Jonakrson in holmgang yesterday. That was well done; he was an able warrior."

Loki grimaced and headed into the wilderness of overflowing bookshelves, putting each of the books back in its place. Thor followed him, wondering idly how Loki knew where each one went, but did not ask because the explanation would doubtless be boring.

"After a few more duels, people will no longer see your lack of a beard as a reflection on your
manhood," Thor assured him.

Loki put the last of his books onto its shelf and stood scowling at the spines. A sigh of frustration escaped him. "I've tried every spell in the library. Nothing has worked."

"Do you really want a beard?" The thought of Loki with one was strange. Thor didn't think it would suit him at all.

"I want people to stop bothering me about it." Loki had taken a new book down from a shelf and was looking through it. He spared Thor a fleeting unfriendly glance. "Are you telling me not to try?"

"No! Grow one if you wish to." Thor hesitated. "But you are very beautiful as you are."

Loki had looked up from the book and met his eyes then, searching. For the first time, he seemed to be taking one of Thor's compliments to his beauty seriously.

Thor wanted to kiss him then, and thought that Loki might let him, but he knew the time was not right. Loki was frustrated over the smoothness of his face just then; Thor could hardly ask him to do something that would give others more reason to question his manliness. Instead he chose his next words with care, and hoped that Loki could find no hidden pitfall in them.

"I think," he said softly, "that you are the handsomest man on Asgard, Loki."

He turned and left Loki to his books. But a mere hour later, Loki had appeared in the hall for dinner, something he never did when he was absorbed in his studies. Thor never asked him if he ever tried again, judging it a sore subject, but no stubble ever appeared on Loki's chin and Thor was quite pleased with that.

At last, one crisp autumn day Thor had coaxed Loki to leave his dusty old books to come out and, well, watch him show off some more. They had gone riding, and stopped far from the palace to let the horses rest and drink. Loki had started examining the plants that happened to grow on the banks of the river and talking about their properties, which was likely a bit of showing off of his own, but Thor never had the patience to listen to that sort of thing for long. He leapt into the air, caught the branch of a tree and swung there for a moment, his boots four feet above the ground, before jackknifing himself, hooking his knees over another branch and allowing himself to dangle upside down. He grinned down at Loki, who of course was watching intently. Loki folded his arms and settled himself to watch with a tolerant smile. But Loki's half-feigned disdain of Thor's exuberant physicality had never bothered Thor before and it wasn't going to start now, and Thor was certain that indulgent amusement was not the only thing he saw in Loki's gaze.

Thor climbed as high as he could, until the branches were too small to support him, making sure to make each move from one branch to another as flashy as possible, jumping from one to another, lifting himself by one arm, hanging by one knee. Loki watched his every move, and missed none of it. He saw when Thor lost his footing and fell several feet before catching himself, though not before acquiring several nasty scrapes and a deep gash in his left thigh.

Thor paused for a moment, standing on a sturdy branch, to examine the wound, swearing. Painful, but nothing serious for an Asgardian.

"Get down here, you big idiot," Loki called.

Thor would have preferred to just stay up in the tree until his leg healed. He wished that Loki could have been looking the other way, maybe at some rare herb or something, for just a few seconds, so that he would not have witnessed Thor falling like a fool. He did not think to affect more bravado as
he climbed the rest of the way down, a trick that only a few years later would become automatic to him. Instead he returned to the ground as efficiently as possible, quiet and embarrassed.

"Let me see it-

"It's nothing."

"It will be. Sit down."

Trying not to look too sulky, Thor sat on the grass, staring at their horses as Loki knelt beside him and carefully pulled the ripped fabric of his leggings back a bit to better display his wound.

"They can take care of it at home." Thor tried to sound indifferent.

"Or I can take care of it here. You have to expect this to happen when you throw yourself through a tree." As he spoke, Loki laid his slender hands over the wound. A green glow began to emanate from his hands, and Thor felt the tingling, not altogether comfortable warmth of a simple healing spell.

Then the warmth faded and Thor's leg felt normal, felt fine. Loki's hands stayed where they were and he didn't look up, but Thor knew the magic was finished. Loki's pale face was flushed. Thor felt fairly certain that it wasn't from the effort of performing magic.

Forgetting his humiliation of only a moment earlier, Thor put his hand over one of Loki's, feeling completely sure that this was the right moment, the right move. Loki's lips parted just slightly; he looked at their hands for one second before finally raising his gaze to Thor's, his right eyebrow lifting just slightly.

Loki looked nervous and yearning and uncertain. It was irresistible. Thor found himself ready for him at once, "Loki," he said. He couldn't think of anything else to say, all the pretty speeches he had planned had fled his mind, but his brother's name seemed to express everything he wanted to.

Gently he raised his other hand to cup the side of Loki's neck, then lightly ran his thumb over Loki's lips. Loki gave a tiny gasp, and that was all the encouragement Thor needed; the next instant they were kissing, their arms around each other. A minute later they were lying on the ground, getting dirt and grass all over their clothes, clutching each other desperately, thrusting against each other through their trousers. They were young and unseasoned; it was over in a couple of minutes. Still it remained one of Thor's most golden memories, that brief tussle with clothes rumpled and stained and leaves in their hair and the ground hard and cold under them.

They had returned to the palace dirty and smiling, leading people to speculate that they had been up to something, but Thor and Loki had recently been boys and the observers were thinking of mischief, not love.

That night Loki came to Thor's bedchamber and established a pattern which was never to cease: Loki began with a challenge and ended by surrendering completely.

As soon as Loki had closed the door behind him, Thor had swept him close to kiss him, and Loki had returned the kiss fervently. But then he had reluctantly pushed himself away and looked at Thor with sudden cold warning in his eyes. "Are you going to call me ergi tomorrow?"

Thor had felt the word, the accusation, like a slap. "No!"

Loki's face was stony but his right eyebrow gave its little quirk, always the first tiny crack to appear in his composure. "Will you despise me for giving this to you?"
Thor shook his head, helpless. It had to be obvious precisely what Thor wanted, it was how they both expected this to go, but. He had made the jokes himself, about men who were respected by no one, but this, this was nothing to do with that. This was him and Loki. They were so much to each other already, brothers, friends, comrades in arms. It would be a sacred act. "Never. I wouldn't, Loki...."

Loki waited, for what Thor was not certain. Thor groped for words.

"I swear it, Loki. I... If you give me this, I will understand that you are honoring me, with a gift." Thor had swallowed with difficulty, his need painful, wishing he could simply sweep Loki up and throw him onto the bed. But it wasn't as simple as that, could never be, not with Loki. He made himself step back, keeping his hands at his side, palms out to Loki in appeal. "Will you honor me, Loki? Will you give me this gift?" And stood tense, because if Loki didn't he was going to die.

But Loki had heard what he needed to, because he stepped closer, and then he was in Thor's embrace again. "Yes, Thor. I will give this to you. And never to anyone else." And with that he had yielded completely, making no effort to even delay as Thor stripped off their clothes, possessively touched every inch of Loki's creamy pale skin, kissed him over and over. And Loki had opened his legs to Thor, had accepted him hungrily, had gritted his teeth through the pain of that first time and forbidden Thor to stop when he offered to, had looked at him with eyes luminous with joy when Thor had at last convulsed with the unbearable excess of pleasure.

That first night Thor had discovered that Loki's alluring composure was only skin deep, that just beneath the surface boiled powerful and easily bruised emotions. Thor delighted in unveiling them again and again, rejoiced to see his reserved, controlled brother gasping and writhing under him, looking at him with burning green eyes, his emotions blazoned clearly across his face, his clever words deserting him, his entire body pleading for him.

Loki had many years later confessed that he had expected Thor to tire of him quickly, but he never had. It was impossible. The pair of them were so different and yet so perfectly complementary, completing each other, knowing each other inside out. And while Loki's devotion was unwavering, he nonetheless was always a challenge to Thor. Loki always gave him the pleasure of overwhelming resistance and in the end, always yielded utterly. Always Thor had to win again what he had won before, had to strive to shatter that elegant composure beneath him.

"Sometimes making love to you is like taming a falcon," Thor had told Loki once, in the midst of an especially good night, as they rested between bouts. "Always having to proceed with care, never knowing when I might feel your talons. And when you yield, it is so exhilarating to have that power and predatory focus at my bidding."

Saying it had been a gamble, and sure enough, Loki had looked at him with those piercing eyes, the haze of lust ebbing. "You think you've tamed me, do you, brother?"

He had placed a large, proprietary hand on the side of Loki's neck. "Only sometimes. For a little while. That's the beauty of it; you always require taming again."

Loki had looked pleased at that. "And making love to the mighty Thor is... like fucking lightning." Thor had given him a jostle and a quelling look, but Loki had resisted both. "I am being sincere. Lightning that seizes me with overwhelming power. I couldn't resist it if I tried. It grips every bit of me, floods every fiber of my being with warmth and light and power, and leaves me gasping and feeling as if I've been cleansed of everything."

Thor had obliged by cleansing him again.
Soon all Asgard knew of their love. Thor, proud of what he if no one else knew was the most challenging catch in the realm, saw to that. Most likely their parents had guessed early on, but brief dalliances between siblings in early adulthood were not unusual, and seldom serious. But when the affair had lasted for a few months and Thor felt certain Loki was not going to slip away from him, one evening Thor had marched into Loki's chamber shortly before one of the feasts Asgardians held at the slightest excuse. Loki was almost finished preparing, a servant carefully fastening his leather cuffs for him.

"Out," Thor ordered, and the servant scrambled out at once. Loki gave him a look of mild annoyance.

"Are you going to finish lacing these for me, brother?" he asked.

Thor did so - it was almost done and took only a few seconds - and then swept Loki into his arms, pinned him against the nearest wall, his red cape enveloping them both.

"Thor, we don't have time for this." Loki squirmed, but Thor held on.

"I will release you in a moment." Then he applied his mouth to the creamy skin of Loki's neck. Loki gave up resisting, sighing into the touch. Probably already planning the complaints he would make if Thor disarranged his clothes. But Thor was careful to leave his brother as unrumpled as possible. He only nuzzled Loki's neck for a few seconds, and then sucked a bit of the tender flesh between his teeth.

"Thor!" Loki gasped, trying to pull away despite his clear enjoyment. Thor did not let him move. Had his mouth not been busy he would have smiled at the response he could already feel against his thigh. He kept on until he was certain that a small but distinct mark had been left, then released Loki, standing back with a satisfied grin.

Loki leaned panting against the wall for a moment, lifting one long-fingered hand to the mark, green eyes hazy and his lips slightly parted.

"I can almost never make you blush," Thor remarked. At that, Loki roused himself, went to the mirror to see. Thor stepped behind him, not close enough to touch, just enough to look over his brother's shoulder. "Not very much. Just a little pale rose on your cheeks."

Loki met his gaze in the mirror, his now sharply focused eyes unreadable, his fingertips just under the little red mark on his throat. "I could cover this up."

Of course he could. He could put on a high collar, or even just cast a glamour to hide the mark.

"You could," Thor acknowledged simply. Neither spoke for a moment. "Do you wish to keep this... between ourselves?" Thor asked at last. "I would have all the realm know that you are mine, Loki, but if you wish it to be secret, so be it."

Loki had studied him, and then a smile had slowly spread over his face. "Oh, no, brother. I too would have all the realm know that you are mine."

Thor had felt a tiny protest at learning that the possessiveness went in both directions, but he was too honest to deny that it was true. Young as he was, already he knew that Loki had parts of his heart that no one else would ever touch.

And so they had entered the feast hall together, Thor keeping his hand on the middle of his brother's back as they made their way from the entrance to their seats. Asgardian etiquette allowed for little more public display than that, but the looks and smiles the two exchanged throughout the evening
dispelled any doubt that might have existed. The romance between the realm's young princes was promptly common knowledge.

The Aesir smiled upon their love - when they did not envy it. Loki was always with him, watching everything, speaking into his ear. All approved of their devotion to each other - or rather, as Thor would have to admit much, much later, of Loki's devotion to him. It was considered simply right; all Asgard loved Thor, it was only fitting that Loki loved him as well. Their parents gave the union their blessing.

As much as they loved each other, things were not perfect between them. Thor knew that his brother was far more clever than he, but he still could not listen to his counsel. He believed, in his heart, that enough courage could get him through any situation, and courage he had in abundance. When only his brother's cunning or magic got them out of battles alive, he could not admit it even to himself, let alone to Loki. They had many little quarrels about that over the centuries, but Thor had never taken them seriously. Only when it was too late did he realize how much all those little slights had festered in his brother's soul. Back then, a few respectful words might have made all the difference, might have prevented the eventual disaster. Now it seemed that even moving mountains could never put things right again.

Loki did not envy Thor for being Thor. He did not, Thor believed, wish to be like him: brave to the point of recklessness, caring only for battle. Loki liked being clever, and Thor did not think he would give up his magic for anything. But he did envy Thor's position, obvious from earliest childhood, as Odin's favorite son. He wore himself out trying to devise ways of favorably impressing Odin, trying to wring more than faint praise from him. Thor knew this, but never, never understood how vital it was to Loki. It had never come between the two of them, not until Loki had learned of his true parentage.

And Loki had envied Thor the easy respect and admiration of people in general. Most of their friends were actually Thor's friends, who accepted Loki because he was Thor's brother, and lover, and friend. Loki was not hated, but he was considered odd, his greatest talents ones that the Aesir did not value - except when they had need of them.

Many things might have been different had Thor been of a more thoughtful nature, but he was not. He loved Loki, and just as he believed that the strength of his arms could get him through any battle, he believed also that the strength of his love for his brother was enough to solve anything. And he continued to believe this, right up until the day when it was not.

To Thor's relief, they did not ask him more questions about Loki's male lover on Asgard. Perhaps they would have, but Batman headed it off with another question. "I understand the two of you were very close before the Chitauri. Do you think he still has any affection for you?"

The question twisted in Thor's gut. "It has taken me many years to convince myself that my brother no longer loves me, even though he has tried to kill me several times."

"Has he? He's fought against you, and injured you. But was he really trying to kill you? When the pair of you dueled during the Chitauri invasion, he stabbed you with one of his small throwing knives. A wound like that is a mosquito bite to one of your kind, and he knew it. Why didn't he take advantage of the opening to do something more lethal?"

"I tried for years to hope that was a sign that he still loved me, but after all the things he has done, I have little hope left."
Early in Loki's career of evil, Loki had saved his life - and attempted to kill him immediately afterwards. Loki and a super-intelligent ape called Gorilla Grodd (Midgard was a very strange place) had teamed up, and the Avengers were battling them. At one point in the battle Grodd had seized a truck loaded with some incendiary chemical and was about to bring it crashing down on Thor when it abruptly dissolved into tiny grains of sand. Grodd whirled, outraged, and there stood a wrathful Loki, tendrils of green light still coiling from his fingers.

"When my so-called brother dies, it will be at my hand," Loki snarled. "If anyone deprives me of that pleasure, there will be no corner of the Nine Realms in which he can hide from me."

With another torrent of crackling green magic Grodd was dead and his henchmen were hanging back, awed. Loki turned to Thor slowly, an unpleasant smile spreading over his scarred lips.

Thor raised Mjölnir just in time to block the full impact of the blast of green. It still seared his entire body painfully, and actually put him out of action for a few days, no small thing for an Asgardian.

Loki's announcement had its effect. The costumed villains Thor combated were far less eager to kill him knowing that Loki had claimed that privilege for himself. Thor had tried to hope that Loki's real reason had been some scrap of lingering affection for him, but the vicious injuries and narrow escapes he experienced their next few meetings had all but killed that hope.

"He did send the Destroyer after me, before that." Thor sighed heavily.

"One of the odd things about your brother," Fury said, "is that occasionally he saves heroes from other villains. Not to any kind of pattern we can see. He sometimes claims to be pissed off at the other villains. Personally, I think he just does it to mess with us."

Thor nodded, doleful. "That would be like him. To sometimes do a good act just to keep people guessing."

"Are you certain that is all it is?" Mycroft pressed.

"I can be certain of nothing where he is concerned."

The last time Thor had met his brother in battle had been four months ago. They had been dueling on the top of one of the steel towers the humans were so fond of building while Loki's minions of the moment hurtled around the city on small flyers similar to those of the Chitauri. They were warriors from Almerac. Their queen Maxima had arrived with her army, demanding either the surrender of Earth or Superman for her consort, to which Fury had replied succinctly, "None of the above."

Back on Asgard Thor had always won their practice bouts, but Loki had become a more ruthless fighter and Thor was limited by the fact that he did not actually want to kill his brother.

"You can still stop this madness, Loki!" Thor had shouted to him, blocking Loki's spear. "I know that the brother I love is still within you, somewhere!"

Loki's face had twisted and his next blow had been accompanied by a torrent of flame. Thor's footing had slipped and the next moment he was dangling off the edge of the building, fingers clutching the ledge. He couldn't even summon Mjölnir to him from its place a few yards away on the
rooftop because he needed both hands to hang on. Only later that day did it occur to him that if he had called Mjölnir he could have taken flight from his fall.

Loki had frozen in place for a second, and in his eyes Thor saw, incredibly, the kind of alarm he would have expected before... before. But he had stopped expecting Loki to have mercy after he had tricked him into the cage on the helicarrier and dropped him thousands of feet – Thor hadn't believed Loki would do it, not really, not until he did. Now he waited, resigned, for the boot on his knuckles.

Loki had stepped closer to the edge. The building was forty stories tall. Thor wondered how much the fall was going to hurt. He wondered how long it would take an Asgardian to recover without healing stones. Human healers were still so primitive.

"Well?" Loki said. "Are you going to ask?"

Thor met his eyes. He hadn't been going to say it, but despite how cold and set Loki's face was, Loki's eyebrow gave its little quirk, and unbidden hope blazed to life in Thor's heart and he heard his own voice saying quietly, "Brother, please."

To his amazement, Loki had dropped his spear, knelt down and grasped his forearms. Thor still expected some kind of trick, but Loki had hauled him up onto the rooftop. As Thor's feet gained purchase on it, Loki complained, "You oaf, you're heavier than ever—"

He stopped there, because Thor was kissing him. Thor hadn't planned it, hadn't thought about it at all, he had simply stumbled into Loki's arms and the next thing he knew he was kissing him. Not softly, it was a fierce kiss that bruised both their lips, and somewhere in the back of his mind Thor was seeing this as yet another battle tactic, even though Loki's mouth was yielding to his just as though the last few years had never happened, and for a long time they were both completely absorbed in the kiss, as if nothing else existed but the communion of their lips.

When finally their lips parted, Loki's eyes remained tightly closed, his fingers digging brutally into Thor's shoulders, his entire body tense. Thor's heart leapt with hope. Loki couldn't, he could not have kissed him like that if he didn't still love Thor, if the real Loki were not still in him.

Thor wanted to declare a hundred things, he wanted to demand and plead for a hundred promises, but too many disappointments with Loki had made him cautious. He started by saying softly, insistently, "Loki. Look at me."

If he could look into Loki's eyes, he would know for sure. Even the Liesmith had a limit to his ability to deceive.

Loki kept his eyes closed, his form relaxing slowly as his slender fingers tentatively slid down to Thor's chest. Thor was about to repeat the command when abruptly he was knocked back and away - but still securely on the rooftop, in no danger of falling - by a flash of burning pain.

He was on his knees, groaning, and looking up he saw green magic uncurling from Loki's hands. Loki had blasted him with magic, and while he was yet reeling with the pain, Loki called his spear back to him - it flew into his hand as Mjölnir did to Thor's - and gave him a tight, angry smile.

"Your trouble, Odinson, is that you believe that loving someone and trusting them are the same thing." Right before stepping off the roof and onto one of the Almeracian flyers, he added, "One would think I would have cured you of that."

Chapter End Notes
Omlteaufromage's beta of Thor and Loki's first time was especially helpful to me. Her comments included "fhdsfishfkldjasfhe3wgharnaharowqp", "gharnhagnwqio;a;hduo2", and, most incisively of all, "neighahieohfnhwi67rt".

Ergi is Old Norse for, basically, "faggot". I love that fandom actually knows Old Norse words for gayness.

Loki referring to Thor's antics as "throwing himself through a tree" was derived from an interview with Chris Hemsworth and Tom Hiddleston. "Throwing himself through a tree" is apparently the latter's idea of manly exercise.

I wrote a bit of meta about the apparent Asgardian expectation that high-ranking men will wear beards, and what this means for Loki, who apparently doesn't grow facial hair.

The thing about Loki turning a bunch of cars and buildings to candy or ice cream is comics canon.
By the end of the week, Thor had told Fury and his colleagues everything there was to know about Loki except that he had been Thor's lover, and none of them were any closer to understanding Loki's tangled plans. Thor left them feeling discouraged. He went to the Raft and watched disconsolate as Loki ate his supper and then laid back down for the hammer in silence, ignoring Thor's presence as much as was possible. Usually Thor tried to talk to him, tried to reach him, but this evening he was too downcast to try. All he said was a gentle, "Sleep well, brother," right before he left, which Loki did not acknowledge.

Thor tried to cheer himself up on the way back to the Tower. Steve was bringing his new girlfriend to meet them all and Thor must be ready to greet her properly so as not to create a bad impression of his teammate. For a few weeks the rest of them had suspected the reason Steve had suddenly stopped spending all of his off-duty time in the Tower's gym working out or alone in his rooms drawing or listening to old music. They had teased him but he had bashfully refused to reveal anything about the lady in question. Thor suspected that Steve didn't really believe the lady, whoever she was, would not lose interest in him after a few dates; in some ways he still saw himself as the scrawny weakling he had been before being treated with the serum. Thor hoped the lady had the sense to value Steve; Steve had mourned his lost Peggy faithfully and long and deserved some happiness now.

Thor was only a few minutes late to the Tower's common room, but Steve's new lady love had already arrived and put all the Avengers under her spell. Thor saw a mane of glossy black hair; the lady was deep in discussion with Natasha. Natasha was always difficult to read, but Thor thought she seemed a little impressed. Pepper and Anthea definitely were. The male Avengers and Bruce Wayne were gathered round, staring rapt at the newcomer. Steve was sitting across from her, smiling shyly, admiration glowing in his eyes.

Tony reluctantly tore his eyes away from the belle of the ball. "Thor! You won't believe who Steve's girlfriend is! It's stars and stripes forever! It's so perfect - they can borrow each other's clothes!"

Steve gave Tony an exasperated look, but his smile did not falter. "Diana, meet Thor Odinson."

"Forgive me for being late," Thor said, finding a path between all the assorted sofas and armchairs. "I am Thor Odinson, of Asgard."

Steve's lady stood to greet him, Steve rising as well with his usual good manners, and Thor saw why they were all so impressed. It wasn't only because the lady was beautiful, although she was, very very much so. He recognized her, without ever having met her personally. Diana, princess of the Amazons, beloved of the gods of Olympus, who had left her home Themiscyra a year ago to aid in the protection of Midgard. Known to Midgard as "Wonder Woman". At the moment wearing a simple tunic that bore the same star spangled design as her battle armor.
"Diana Hippolytesdottir! I have heard much of your prowess. You are among the foremost of shield-maidens." Thor placed his right fist over his heart and made the slight bow customary in his realm for greeting foreign royalty. She graciously returned it with her bracelets crossed before her.

"And I of yours, Prince Thor. Your exploits rival those of Perseus himself!"

Thor had no idea who Perseus was, but he could find out later; her tone was a flattering one.

"Now we've got two of them," Tony groaned theatrically. "God help us. Or rather, gods help us."

Diana gave him a puzzled glance, but asked Thor, "Are you acquainted with my gods, Prince Thor?"

"Of course, they're all in a big god club," Pepper said.

"No, princess, we are not precisely-"

Thor was going to explain that Asgardians were not truly gods, not in the sense that the Olympians were, but Tony broke in. "Oh, hey, princess! I just thought of something you totally need to see!"

"Tony," Natasha said, warning.

"You don't even know what it is. It's hilarious, trust me. JARVIS, find the Wonder Woman clip from the movie *Back to School.*" Abruptly a screen appeared in midair. The Avengers had designated a weekly "movie night" to educate Thor and Steve in the culture of modern Midgard, but Thor had not seen this one. The bit Tony wanted began after a few seconds. A man and a woman on the screen spoke to each other.

"What did he want?" the man on the screen asked.

"Oh, what do all men want?" the lady replied.

"He wants you to dress up as Wonder Woman, tie him up with a golden lariat and force him to tell the truth?"

Tony put a stop to the movie and Diana looked at him, puzzled. "But why would a man wish to be forced to tell the truth by my lasso?"

Tony's eyes lit in a gleeful way that reminded Thor of his brother, but before he could answer, Wayne, with a surprisingly efficient motion, swooped an arm around Tony and clapped his hand over Tony's mouth. Natasha actually smiled at that. Wayne was a strong man, though obviously he had built his muscles out of vanity and not valor, and Tony struggled playfully against his grip. "Let's talk about something more interesting," Wayne suggested smoothly. "How did you two meet?"

Steve smiled. "During the war."

The two of them told the story together. Diana and a few other members of the Justice League had travelled back in time to the Second World War and had to stop a villain called Vandal Savage from changing history in his own favor. Diana and Steve had fallen in together and fought side by side. From a couple of fleeting glances that passed between them, Thor suspected they had done a little that was not fighting, but they both seemed too reserved to display their affection too obviously. Not like Wayne and Tony; Wayne had decided the danger of Tony continuing to speak had passed and moved his hand to Tony's shoulder, occasionally stroking his fingertips back and forth, and Tony was leaning against him, his hand lightly on Wayne's knee.

"When they unfroze me, I thought Diana was gone too, like everyone else," Steve said. "Then she
was in the papers and I knew it was her. But I couldn't introduce myself until after she had her time travel mission, it might have messed something up."

"I was going to seek you out," Diana told him. "But you found me first."

"Batman wasn't there in the past," Steve explained, "so I figured it was safe to ask him to tell me when it happened. A couple months ago he gave the all clear, so I went to meet her. She'd seen photos of Captain America, but I always had my mask on."

Somehow the radiance of Diana's smile increased, and all those present melted a little at the sight. Truly she was favored of the gods. "I was overjoyed to see him. I feared he might have died since then and that I would never see him again."

"Guess there was something lucky about getting frozen after all, Angel."

"'Angel', is it?" Tony was delighted. "That's adorable. Also it reminds me of something I've been meaning to ask our resident demigod."

"Yes?" Thor looked at him.

"Did it hurt?"

"Did what hurt?"

"When you fell out of heaven."

Thor frowned slightly, remembering when he had been banished to Midgard and fallen in front of Jane Foster's truck. "Of course it did. Why do you ask?"

Apparently this was a modern joke, because all the Avengers except Steve smirked. Bruce Banner shook his head reprovingly. "Tony, give it a rest."

"If I did you'd start looking for the pods."

"Pods?" Steve asked, bewildered.

"Oh, no, you missed the body snatchers! Okay, we know what we're watching on our next movie night. What do you think, the original or one of the remakes?"

"Original," Clint said firmly.

"Original it is. Maybe the princess will join us so Thor doesn't have to feel lonely being the only royalty here. It's every Thor's Day night."

Diana glanced at Steve. "I would be honored, if time permits. And please, all of you, call me Diana." "All right, Diana," Anthea spoke up. "Would you mind telling us a little about the Amazons? Do you have any government besides your queen? Do you have plans for more extensive diplomatic relations with the outside world?"

"This is what I get for dating a civil servant," Pepper said ruefully. "How about the part about warrior women stopping mythological monsters from rampaging over the Earth?"

Diana answered all their questions cheerfully. The Amazons were an honorable warrior culture like his own, from the sound of it, but one that valued scholarship and mercy more than did Asgard. Thor thought that might have been expected of a tribe of shield-maidens. He only half-listened, absorbed
in an idea that was coming to him, one that frightened him with its potential for hope.

When the gathering began to disperse, Thor followed Steve and Diana out of the common room and into the elevator. Steve assumed Thor was going to his own floor - the top one, as suited the god of thunder - but instead he went to the roof with the pair. "Forgive me for intruding, my friends, but I would have a word."

"Of course," both of them replied at once with their usual deeply ingrained courtesy. Thor waited until they had stepped out onto the roof before dropping to one knee and bowing his head, formal and respectful.

"Diana Hippolytesdottir, Princess of Themiscyra, I crave a boon. Whatever you may ask in return, I am yours to command."

Steve looked dumbfounded. Diana took having a deity kneeling and formally begging her for favors in stride. "Prince Thor Odinson, I will be honored to help you in any way I might. There is no question of repayment, we are warriors in the same cause."

That was the response he had expected. In her place he would have said much the same. Thor rose. "I think you have been outside Themiscyra long enough to know of the crimes of my brother Loki."

"I have."

"I believe that my brother's capacity to cause harm would be considerably diminished if we knew what he sought, but his mind is too sly for any to follow its workings. Many have questioned him, but on Asgard he was known as the Silvertongue, and the Liesmith."

Diana nodded slowly, grasping what he was going to request.

"Hippolytesdottir, will you bind my lying brother with your lasso, that we may learn the truth of his designs?"

"Whenever you wish, Prince Thor."

Chapter End Notes

Pairing Wonder Woman with Captain America was Grey Bard's suggestion, since Diana is known to like wholesome blond WWII soldiers named Steve. In the Justice League animated series, Diana traveled back in time to the 40's and met Steve Trevor, but in this universe it was Steve Rogers she met on that mission.

The movie "Back To School" really does have that amusing bit of dialogue, but it was made in the 1980's, before Diana left Themiscyra in this fictional universe, so we'll assume that the movie wasn't made until the 21st century.

The plot didn't give me much room to show it, but I really think Pepper and Anthea would be awesome together.

I really like the idea of Norse naming customs being applied to Diana Hippolytesdottir.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Loki Liesmith versus Wonder Woman's Lasso of Truth. For the Silvertongue, the truth can also be a weapon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Diana had business of her own to attend to the following day, but in the evening she accompanied Thor to the Raft a little before Thor's usual time for arriving so his brother could eat supper. When they entered the cell, Loki was lying facing away from the door, rereading *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. Diana paused by the door as Thor walked to his brother.

"I don't recognize that light tread. Have you found me a new jailor, Odinson?" Loki asked. Thor leaned down to lift Mjölnir and Loki rose, tilting his head with a baiting smile. "Or did you bring me a wench to comfort me in my imprisonment? How kind." He turned, smirking, and saw Diana. He recognized her immediately, and his eyes flickered to the golden rope she held. Instantly his hands were up and blazing green magic exploded towards her. Instinctively she deflected the ball of light and fury with her bracelets and it dissipated quickly. By then Loki had flung his book (the heaviest one in the series) into Thor's face with full force and was seizing the small table for another weapon. Thor gave him a punch that knocked him across the room, and Diana lassoed him before he could catch his breath.

The three of them stayed that way for a minute, breathing hard. Thor thought with excitement that this was going to work. Loki was usually the most docile of prisoners, resistance beneath his dignity. He fought only when he could win and in captivity surrendered meekly right up until the moment he escaped. If he was hopelessly fighting, there had to be a good reason.

The god of lies strained against the rope. When it did not yield to the tiniest degree, he stopped and examined it. He twisted his hands inward and a green crackle of magic spilled from them onto the lasso. Nothing.

"Interesting," he said, trying for composure. "So this is what happens when gods contend with gods." He glared at Thor. "This seems like my sort of underhanded tactics, not those of warriors who think themselves honorable."

"I confess," Diana said to Thor, "I am not certain if the magic of my gods will compel other gods." Loki's eyes flitted between them as he noted this information.

But Thor had already thought of this. "You cannot spend centuries as the brother of Loki Silvertongue without learning a trick or two."

"Is that so, Odinson? You have finally learned something from me? I am so proud." Loki's tone was vicious.

"I have a way of testing the lasso's effects on him. A question he will not answer honestly if he can possibly avoid it. I did promise not to reveal it, but I did not promise not to compel him to do so."
Suddenly comprehending, Loki gave him a look of sheer horror. "No! Don't you dare, you wretched oathbreaker! I will never forgive you for all eternity!"

Thor grinned. "Tell the princess about Sleipnir, brother."

Loki's teeth gnashed, and then he was relating the entire embarrassing story. For a woman hearing an account of how Loki had shape-shifted into mare form and given birth to an eight-legged horse, Diana seemed remarkably unperturbed, but then, she had spent her life hearing the tales of the amorous adventures of Zeus and the faboulous births of the Olympians. When the story was finished, Loki informed Thor, "At this moment I hate you a great deal. If I had a weapon I would cut you down on the spot."

Thor said only, "It is working." He still wore the same unholy grin. "Do forgive me for that taste of your own medicine, brother."

"I am not as good at forgiveness as you are, Odinson," Loki retorted. "So, Amazon, I see you are willing enough to use your gifts in the service of men. Have you learned nothing from the anguish of your sisters?" He leaned forward, his expressive eyes wide with apparent sympathy. "I have read your history, shield-maiden. You Amazons showed Midgard the best that was possible for your species, strove to be a shining light to all mankind. And did they love you for it? You failed utterly in your noble purpose. Men responded to your lofty example with treachery, enslavement and rape."

Diana frowned slightly and began to speak, but Loki continued, his tone that of a friend reluctantly breaking tragic news. "Do you think men have changed since your sisters retreated to their island, Amazon? Do you truly believe there are not millions of them, now, today, who would relish having your entire race stripped and in chains at their feet? Do you not read of the fates of countless women the world over every day in the newspapers of 'Man's World'?" And Loki began enumerating some of these fates, horrors that sickened Thor, phrased in profanity of a sort he had never before heard from his brother. Thor could only sit staring, utterly appalled. "How long do you think your brave sisters would retain their courage subjected to such practices?" Loki hissed, dropping his regretful tone, and followed with some stunningly obscene suggestions about possible uses for enslaved Amazons in some future supervillain regime.

That finally galvanized Diana out of her shock. With the lasso she yanked Loki to her, seized him by his hair, bent him forward and drove her knee forcefully into his stomach. Thor took a step forward, but did not interfere. In recent years he had often had the unpleasant duty of watching other heroes knock his brother about. He still retained some hope that eventually they would knock some sense into him.

Loki made no attempt to resist. He grunted with the pain as she delivered a punch to his jaw that knocked him more or less upright, and then she had him pinned to the wall.

In a low voice she hissed, "Threaten my sisters again and only my regard for your brother will stay my hand while you yet have life in you!"

He laughed. There was blood on his teeth. Thor's fists clenched but he forced himself to remain still. "And why do you not snap my neck now and prevent any possibility of my ever harming your tribe? Will you be content that you did not annoy a fellow hero - a male hero - who you scarcely know by dispatching a blight upon the universe like me when every one of your sisters is bound and battered, covered with their own blood and the seed of a hundred men? When they find themselves subjugated once again and know that you could have prevented-"

Diana punched him again. And again. Loki continued to laugh. Too late Thor caught on to his game and rushed forward to seize her fist, but she had delivered a final blow that knocked Loki
unconscious to the floor.

They stood looking down at Loki for a long moment. At last she spoke, amazement in her tone. "He wanted me to strike him senseless. To escape our questions."

"Yes. I should have anticipated what he was doing." He looked at her, awkward. "The things he said - his sole aim was to bait you. I have seen him do it before. In truth, even at his worst he has never stooped to any such vile deeds, or aided in them."

"He is a more devious trickster even than Hermes." At the wonder in her voice, Thor realized that Diana was less equipped to anticipate Loki's tactics than anyone else he knew. Until one year ago, she had spent her entire life surrounded by shield-maidens as honorable as herself. She did not yet truly believe that others were not. A pity she was beginning with such an advanced example. "Forgive me, Thor. Steve warned me of your brother's ability to scatter people's wits with his words, but still I fell into his trap. I must learn not to lose control of my temper under such goading."

"No one is impervious to my brother's clever tongue, Hippolytesdottir. It is no shame to you." He knelt beside Loki to examine him. His mouth and one eye were swollen, but injuries like that healed quickly for their kind. Diana joined him in trying to revive Loki, but he was genuinely unconscious. Thor put him on the narrow futon that served as his bed here. He placed Mjölnir back on Loki's chest and a glass of water within easy reach. "We shall let him sleep. Can you return in the morning, Diana? I think it would be best if we do not give my brother time to strategize further."

"As early as you wish, Thor."

Restless, excited thoughts kept Thor awake late into that night. At last he had found the key to defeating his brother's schemes, and with that, perhaps he could redeem Loki from evil-doing. Perhaps he could have his brother back. For so long he had ruthlessly tamped down his own hopes. Now they flourished again, hard as he strove to suppress them.

Usually he fell asleep easily, almost as soon as he lay down if he was alone. This night it was after midnight before he drifted off.

He was awakened before dawn by the Avengers communicator, loud and blaring. He shook himself, forcing himself to a sitting position and rubbing his eyes hard. The Avengers were never awakened unless it was important.

His fingers clumsy with sleep, he reached for the communicator and pushed its button. Fury's face appeared on the little screen. "Thor. You okay there?"

"Yes, Director. What is it?"

Fury paused for a second. "Loki's escaped."

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure almost everyone in this fandom knows the story of Sleipnir, but in case anyone doesn't, here. I decided that in this fictional universe word about Sleipnir never got around on Earth. Luckily for Loki, Diana is so used to the whacked out stuff that
happened in Greek mythology that a god giving birth to an eight-legged horse doesn't make her bat an eyelash.

Loki's references to Amazon history are taken from the George Perez run of her title. To summarize, the Greek goddesses created the Amazons to be a model for all humanity. Heracles pretended to make peace with them, then he and his (male) warriors drugged them all, then enslaved them. The Amazons did escape before long, but their goddesses ordered them to continue wearing the cuffs on their wrists as a reminder. This particular version of Loki would not commit rape - as an *ergi* that's a bit too close to home for him, sparking his areas of empathy as does torture - but canonically he's willing to make implied threats of rape to achieve his ends. Hey, I never said he was a nice guy.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Loki's escape. The star spangled romance continues. Shawarma turned out not to be such a great idea after all. The older Brodinson can be sneaky too. Batman is also driven up the wall by Gryffindors. Why it was not always Loki who lay beneath Thor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A short time later, all of the Avengers were in their ops room on the common floor of the Tower, puffy-eyed and chugging coffee. Fury had sent them the video surveillance footage of Loki's escape. Tony projected it onto the air.

It began with the room dimly lit as it always was at night, just enough light that the surveillance crew could see that the inmates were present. Loki stirred and groaned as he regained consciousness. After a second his voice commanded, "Lights on." His cell had been rigged with a few voice commands since he was required to be confined by Mjölnir. The lights obediently turned on. Loki's face was bruised and swollen. He surveyed the room with a little smile. The smile widened into a sharklike grin. He lifted his hands, flexing his fingers, and then closed them around Mjölnir's handle.

And lifted it.

Everyone glanced at Thor, who was stunned. "How the hell?" Steve said softly.

Laughing softly, still holding Mjölnir, Loki got to his feet. Without delay he went to the door and with a few blows smashed it down. By the time he had broken through the second door, he was laughing aloud, the crazed laughter they had all learned to take as a warning sign.

A phalanx of guards was waiting outside his cell. They opened fire but Loki had already summoned his forcefield and they never reached him.

Still laughing, Loki sent a cloud of green smoke from his fingertips to the guards who had assembled outside his cell. When it dispersed, they were unconscious.

Immediately Loki set off at a run down the corridors, applying the hammer to every door that stood between him and freedom, laughing wildly every time he swung it. He refrained from using it on the second wave of guards who tried to stop him, returning to bolts of magic to knock them flat.

The images dissolved and Fury's voice sounded. "Once he got outside, he just disappeared. Not a trace of him."

Thor dropped his head into his hands.

Steve stood abruptly. "I need to warn Diana."

Thor looked up. "If she wishes for any aid, she has but to call upon me. It is my fault she came to my brother's attention."
Steve nodded and stepped away from them to make the call. Tony apparently had a similar thought because he pulled out his own cell to send a text message, Thor supposed to Wayne. Banner turned to Thor. "Any ideas on how he was able to lift Mjölnir?"

Thor shook his head slowly. "In all the realms, only my father and I have ever been able to move it. Even Superman could not lift it." He would have to ask his father if he could make any guesses. "But Loki has grown in power in recent years. He may have found some enchantment which allows him to lift it. If so, he has become a dangerous foe indeed. If he intends to use it in his evil schemes...." Thor stood abruptly. He would have to go home to consult Odin at once.

"I don't think he does. He left it at the Raft," Fury informed him.

"What?"

"He left your magic hammer right in front of the prison gates. You can come over and collect it any time."

The Avengers all exchanged glances. "Why would he leave it?" Clint asked.

"Maybe it's a phony?" Natasha suggested.

"Nobody can budge it," Fury said. "It's either Thor's hammer or some other giant unliftable hammer that looks exactly like it."

Tony stepped forward. "Want a ride to the Raft, He-Man? I'll suit up."

"Thank you, Tony."

"We're doing the obvious," Fury was saying. "Sweeping the area, reviewing the footage frame by frame, using SHIELD's face recognition technology to look for some sign of Loki anywhere on Earth, checking out all the areas he's known to frequent. I'll tell you when we find something. I want you guys to stick together for the next couple weeks - is Rogers listening? Rogers, you can stay with your girlfriend if you prefer, just make sure there's other capes around you, and her too. She and the Avengers are the ones Loki's most likely to come after if he feels like settling a score." Fury paused for a second before saying to someone on his end, "Get a team on Jane Foster, now."

"Already done, sir," someone replied.

*Jane.* Fear for her was cold in Thor's stomach. He tried to tell himself that Loki knew she had left him, had probably somehow induced her to do so, that she was no longer of any interest to him, but it was no good. "I must go to protect her," he said numbly.

Banner put a hand on his arm. "I'm not sure that's a good idea, Thor. Loki's much more likely to come after you than her, but if you happen to be with her...."

Thor clenched his fists. Banner was right. But a wave of grief swept through Thor, that things had come to such a pass that he needed to fear that his own brother, his beloved companion of centuries, would harm a clever, kind young woman because Thor had cared for her.

Thor collected Mjölnir and also claimed the few possessions Loki had in his cell, not asking permission. No one challenged him. Aside from a few changes of clothes, there was only a tall stack of novels; in prison Loki was permitted only fiction, as any knowledge he acquired tended to be used for nefarious ends. Back at the Tower Thor flipped through every one of them, hoping against hope...
to find a note tucked inside, a page corner turned down, but there was nothing.

One room on Thor's floor of the Tower had been intended as a guest room. When he had first begun to live on Midgard part time and had been more hopeful about his brother, Thor had brought some of Loki's things from home and placed them in this room, and acquired sheets and towels in the cool dark green Loki liked. The room had waited empty since then for its intended occupant. Thor had stopped going into it a few years ago, the reminder too painful. But he had never been able to bring himself to change the room when he lost hope, just as when he had thought his brother dead, he had not allowed Loki's room in the palace to be emptied. It still remained as Loki had left it all those years ago.

Now Thor entered the guest room for the first time in years. He put all of Loki's things from his prison cell on one shelf in this room, sat on the edge of the bed, and stared at them for a while, still dazed from worry and lack of sleep.

Thor was to have many sleepless nights in the months to come.

For the next four months, there was no sign of Loki in any realm known. Thor visited Asgard. Odin was baffled as to how Loki had lifted Mjölnir and Thor was left worrying about how much Loki had grown in magic, how much trouble he would cause with it now.

Diana, a warrior born and raised, was unalarmed by Loki's escape, at least so far as her own peril went. She pledged herself ready to apply her lasso to him again whenever he was found. She was a valuable sparring partner, Thor learned - the strength of Amazons was comparable to that of Asgardians and he need not fear harming her. She soon became a friend as well as a comrade in arms. Thor's courtly manners were closer to what she was accustomed to than those of modern Midgard, and she enjoyed being called "Hippolytesdottir", liked hearing her beloved mother's name applied to her.

She and Steve were no more demonstrative in public, but judging by the way they looked at each other, their romance was blossoming nicely. Tony persisted in offering Steve dubious advice about the courtship rituals of modern Midgard, even though neither Steve nor Diana were accustomed to modern Midgard and they seemed to be managing just fine on their own, improvising ways for a soldier of the 1940's and a shield-maiden of ancient Greece to find their way to each other. It became a game to see which Avenger could shut Tony's mouth first, before he said something guaranteed to set Steve fleeing red-faced.

Steve took him aside one day in the gym. "Thor, I've got to ask. Just what is it you're hoping for, with Loki?"

Thor had hardly thought of it that way. For years all he had been able to do was try to put out the fires his brother set. He had to mull it over for a minute before replying.

"I hope that if I learn his plans, I can prevent them. And perhaps... perhaps if his plans are foiled, he will reform."

"And what if he doesn't?"

Thor shrugged wearily. "Then I will continue to try to stop him from doing evil. What else can I do?"

"I just...." Steve hesitated. "Do you think things could go back the way they were?"
Yes. It was what Thor hoped for every day, every minute, however impossible it seemed. Their bond had been so utterly right, it went against all the laws of the universe that it might ever be sundered. As Thor saw it, Loki had been working very hard to keep them apart. If he only stopped making so much effort, they would be drawn together again naturally, the balance of the universe restored.

"Thor." Steve's voice was very gentle. "Some things can't be fixed."

"Steve." Thor looked into Steve's eyes. "You should understand better than that."

Steve straightened up, understanding already, but said nothing.

"Both of us have watched a man we loved as a brother fall into an abyss, and been unable to save him when we both would have gladly given our own lives to do so. Both of us have seen that man return from the dead twisted to the evil ends of others. Is there anything that would ever have made you give up on Buck?"

Steve dropped his gaze. After a few seconds, he shook his head. "It's not quite the same, but... I understand."

Thor clapped him on the shoulder and then left the gym. He finished his workout by joining the Justice League in battling a team called the Legion of Doom. They had the situation well in hand, but Thor had learned that fighting supervillains was a standard and very effective method for Midgard's heroes to handle emotional turmoil.

Earth formed fragile alliances with Almerac and Naltor. (With difficulty they were able to persuade the former not to demand the hand of Superman in marriage as a condition.) The universe was showing itself to be a frightening place and such treaties were becoming necessary.

After four months Loki appeared on Alfheim, aiding Malekith the Accursed in an attempt at conquest. He had departed by the time Thor reached Alfheim. When Thor returned to Earth, he found that Diana's lasso had been stolen.

The theft was swiftly traced to the sorceress Tala, who coveted it for its magical properties. A team from the Justice League was assigned to help Diana retrieve it. Thor and Steve offered their aid unasked, and the rest of the Avengers came along as a matter of course. It was heartening how the entire Avengers team marched into battle where any one of them lead, never seeming to even question whether they would do so. It was a pleasant reminder of the centuries on Asgard when he had known that on any adventure he proposed, however reckless, he would be accompanied by Sif, the Warriors Three... and Loki. He had not then realized just how precious a gift that loyalty was, and he hoped that he did not endanger his current allies as foolishly he had those on Asgard.

Tala and her few accomplices were apprehended and the lasso restored to its rightful owner. The Avengers and the Justice League members concerned retired to the Avengers Tower for celebratory pizza and beer. (After the shawarma debacle, the others had firmly vetoed Tony's various suggestions of new things they might try for after-battle refreshment. There were times when only the tried and true would suffice.)

As they ate and laughed and told each other stories, Thor found himself quieter than usual. It was Natasha who noticed, unsurprisingly. Little escaped her sharp eyes.

"I can see the gears turning," she remarked.

Thor looked around in confusion.

"Sorry. The gears in your head. You're thinking."
His mind automatically supplied the sarcastic remark Loki would have made had he heard anyone accusing Thor of thinking. "I was thinking that the timing of this theft is suspicious."

Natasha made the connection immediately. "You think Loki was behind Tala stealing the lasso?"

"I see no compelling evidence, but it is the sort of thing he would do."

She nodded. "And he'll probably do it again, right?"

"I would be surprised if he did not." Thor leaned forward, about to tell the others his theory, but she put a hand on his arm.

"Let's talk to Diana about this later. Without so many people around."

It was Natasha's way. Secrecy was her weapon. Thor nodded and as a plan began to take shape in his mind, he was glad she had stopped him.

As it turned out, he was laughing at one of Pepper's stories when Diana left and he missed her exit. When Tony noticed, he asked JARVIS if she were still in the Tower and was informed that she was on Steve's floor. Thor held Tony upside down by his ankles until he promised not to tease Steve about it the following day and then went to bed.

Diana joined them for breakfast in the common room the next morning. She was perfectly composed, too innocent to realize that embarrassment might have been expected, leaving all the sheepishness to Steve. Thankfully, Tony was holed up in his lab inventing something. Natasha and Bruce were the only others up yet and they, along with Thor, did not so much as give Steve a significant look, allowing him to get his blushes and stammering over with quickly. Having a vital topic of conversation helped.

Thor explained his suspicions quickly and went on, "If Loki is indeed behind the theft, he will try again."

Diana threaded the golden rope between her fingers reverently. "I will not allow anyone to take the lasso from me."

Thor paused for a second. "Actually, Diana, that is exactly what I am going to suggest that you do."

Natasha saw it at once, had probably anticipated his plan before he had even formulated it. Bruce's face was inscrutable. Steve got it after another minute. This was not unlike some of the operations he had taken part in during the war.

"So long as you have the lasso," Thor explained, "Loki will continue to send people to take it from you. The next time someone attempts to steal it, if they do not seem excessively dangerous, allow them to. We can watch them and then reclaim it when Loki comes out of hiding - which he will not do until he thinks you have lost your lasso."

"I'll go undercover and keep an eye on it, once it's stolen," Natasha offered. There it was again, that ready loyalty of warriors; Thor smiled his gratitude.

Diana was understandably reluctant. The lasso was not merely a weapon, it was a gift from her gods. Only the prospect of a series of supervillains, each with more formidable forces at their disposal than the last, coming after her lasso convinced her to go along with the plan.

After she left, Thor decided he had shown enough tact. As Steve was trying to walk past him in the hallway, Thor stopped him with a heavy hand on his shoulder and gave him a congratulatory grin.
Steve turned predictably red. "At least she's not my sister," he grumbled as he shrugged Thor's hand off.

"Seducing beautiful women, joking about Asgardian romantic customs - I think Tony is rubbing off on you, Captain."

"God forbid."

A little over a month later, Diana was approached by an archaeologist named Barbara Minerva with a request to examine her lasso for scholarly purposes, and a claim that Minerva had found Amazon artifacts she wished to show Diana. In other circumstances, the claim would have filled Diana with joy. As it was, she went to see Minerva full of suspicions, which were unfortunately borne out.

Minerva proved to have the power to take on a cheetah-like form with the aid of a secret ritual - one involving human sacrifice - and her intention was to steal the lasso as a prized artifact. With reluctance, Diana allowed the Cheetah to "defeat" her in battle and abscond with the lasso. Natasha adopted the identity of a trafficker in black market antiquities, a pose she had used before, and had little trouble maintaining contact with Barbara Minerva, who was about as shady as the average weeping willow. Minerva was kept under surveillance and left unmolested, while Diana fretted and Thor hoped that Loki really believed he was that stupid. Not that he was very worried. If there was anything in the Nine Realms that Loki would not expect, it was Thor being devious.

Not long after the lasso was stolen, Loki showed up on Earth, in Kasnia, helping the queen's betrothed - who turned out to be Vandal Savage in disguise - mount a palace coup. This proved to be a grave miscalculation, as Queen Audrey was a personal friend of Diana's. Had that not been the case, the coup would not have attracted superhero scrutiny so swiftly and Loki's presence might have gone unnoticed for a time.

As it was, Diana and the Avengers were in Kasnia within hours, having stopped off briefly to relieve Barbara Minerva of Diana's lasso with less trouble than Midgardians routinely experienced in picking up their dry cleaning. Taking Loki into custody proved more challenging than anticipated; he fought more furiously than he ever had. Thor was obliged to knock his brother unconscious before taking him to the Justice League's satellite, where Oracle had a formidable cell ready for him. Thor had already had Loki's books and clothes from his previous cell on the Raft put there, waiting for him. Not the reunion he had once hoped for, but still, bloody and sweating, Thor took heart. If Loki were this desperate not to risk having the lasso applied to him again, then being forced to tell the truth would work. It would halt his evil schemes.

And then perhaps, just perhaps, Thor could have his brother back.

Loki's eyes were poison green when Thor entered his cell accompanied by Diana, and they widened with surprise to see the Amazon's golden rope at her waist, confirming Thor's suspicions. "How-" he began, then tilted his head back, appraising. "Ah, I see. Well played. Let me guess: it was Romanoff's idea."

"No," Thor said, absurdly feeling as if he were showing off his completed lessons to an elder brother. "Mine."

Loki's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe it."

"Apparently I am capable of being devious when I have need to. I never needed to before, for you did it for me."
Loki was watching Diana with apprehension, but of course he had gambits left to play. "So this is your vengeance, Odinson? To humiliate me by laying my every thought out for everyone to hear?"

Diana was unhooking her lasso from her waist. Thor put a hand on her arm, staying her. "You know that is not my purpose, brother."

"You used to force me to be silent. Now you force me to speak."

Loki still knew how to affect him. Thor had to steel himself, but surely there were limits. "Loki, whatever you say in Diana's lasso, I will share only what is of strategic value. All else I will take to my grave, you have my word."

"And mine," Diana said at once, crossing her bracelets in the traditional salute of the Amazons.

Loki's eyebrow gave its little quirk. His expression remained otherwise glacial. "Don't be foolish, you know we're being recorded."

Thor turned to the intercom. "Lady Oracle, you can stop recording our words while still watching us, can you not?"

"If you're sure about that, Thor," her voice replied.

"I am certain. Do not record our words."

A few seconds later, Batman's gravelly voice emerged from the intercom. "Thor, this is a bad idea. We need all the information he can give us, and memory is fallible, you will forget vital details. And you know how clever Loki is with words. We need to be able to analyze everything he says. Even with the lasso, he will try to find ways to hide what he does not wish to reveal."

Thor felt certain that he would remember anything of real importance. In any case, there was nothing for it. "I have given my word."

Batman sounded like he wanted to punch him. Probably he did. "He's a supervillain, Thor. After the things he's done, you have no obligation to him to keep your word."

Thor looked at the intercom, surprised. "But I have an obligation to myself to keep it."

Loki grinned, his toothy supervillain grin. "Gryffindors, what can you do?" he asked the intercom.

"I'll be watching you, Silvertongue," Batman growled.

"I'm turning off the audio feed now," Oracle's voice announced.

Loki's eyes flitted from Diana to Thor, and abruptly he laughed. "That was easy. I have ever been able to use your oaths against you, Odinson. Remember how I got between your legs for the first time?"

Thor did, of course. Had Loki simply asked, he would have agreed, but of course Loki could not do it the simple way. (Only after losing his brother did it occur to Thor that Loki might have been afraid he would refuse, that that was why he had to go about it in such a roundabout way. At the time he had assumed it was only the mischief in him.)

No, Loki had wagered him that Thor could not make Hogun laugh and Loki could, with the prize being that the winner could chose any position they liked that night. Thor rarely won wagers against
Loki, but he could seldom resist taking them up. It seemed a trivial prize, it wasn't as if either of them was ever reluctant to accede to the wishes of the other, but Loki knew that the competition between them was enticing enough in itself.

Thor had spent a few days devising ridiculous stunts to try to get a smile out of Hogun but nothing worked. At last Loki had one evening sat beside Hogun at supper and remarked, "I am giving up mischief and magic and shall devote myself from now on to doing good works."

Hogun had given a short bark of laughter. Everyone else had guffawed and Loki had met Thor's eyes, gleeful. Still laughing, Thor had raised his goblet to Loki, acknowledging his victory.

Later, in Loki's bedchamber, Thor had cheerfully shucked his armor and asked, "So what is your pleasure tonight, brother?"

With that watchful look he knew only too well, Loki had given a slow smile. "I want you on my bed, on all fours." At Thor's surprise, he had gone on, "With me behind you."

For a few seconds Thor could only stare. He had never actually thought of trading roles in this, and Loki had never given any hint that he wished to.

Loki tilted his head, his expression cool, as if he were merely interested. "Are you going to deny me my rightful winnings? Does honor permit a prince of Asgard to go back on a wager?" His tone conveyed that he did not actually care one way or the other. Thor was not fooled.

Of course, honor did not permit him to back out. He would have to allow Loki to do this to him. And to his amazement, the thought of it suddenly had him hot and shivery with anticipation. It had never occurred to him, but now he knew that he wanted this. After so many centuries together, lying with Loki had become almost comfortable, very familiar. With these few words Loki had reintroduced danger and the allure of the unknown and unexpected. Perhaps that had been his purpose.

Thor looked away as he pulled off the rest of his clothes, tingling with alarm and anticipation. He could hardly believe that after so many years of lying together he could still be shy with Loki, but Loki's request had changed everything. To cover his embarrassment, Thor seized Loki by the neck and kissed him soundly before assuming the directed position.

It seemed a long minute before Loki was behind him, stroking his thighs and buttocks with those clever long-fingered hands. This continued in silence for so long that Thor began to wonder what his tricky brother was about.

"You really would allow me to do this just because I won a silly bet, wouldn't you?" Loki murmured at last.

"Take your forfeit, Loki." Thor was beginning to get impatient. And his embarrassment was returning. "Do you need instructions?"

As he had intended, that annoyed Loki. "I think I can figure it out. You certainly did." His fingertips lightly stroked over the insides of Thor's thighs. Given their current position and intentions, the sensations seemed different from usual, more alarming, more heady. "You don't really think I'll make you pay this forfeit, do you? I only wanted to test the extent of your honor."

"Stop blathering about it and do it. Do you hear me complaining?"

Loki's hands left him. "Get up and take me. I still get to choose, I want to be on my back tonight."

Something wasn't right, but it took Thor a few seconds to grasp it. What Loki wanted was to drive
him to admit that he wanted to do this, merely yielding to the act was not enough. Well, Loki wasn't going to win that part of this game, at least.

Thor turned abruptly and seized Loki by the shoulder, shoving him brusquely onto his back. Loki grinned at the rough treatment - he liked that sometimes, to be manhandled by his stronger brother like a thrall taken as spoils of war - but Thor was certain he saw a quickly concealed flash of disappointment on Loki's face. He reached for the oil with a little smile.

"Did you really think I would be so ruthless with you, brother?" Loki asked. "As if I-" And then he stopped, shocked, when Thor smeared the oil over Loki's cock. Thor enjoyed his brother's stunned expression even more than the way that familiar organ responded to his touch. "What are you-" He swallowed. "Thor, you really don't have to, I was only teasing you."

"Do you not want me to?" Thor asked, not pausing as he slicked his brother thoroughly. Judging by how rapidly Loki's erection was firming, that was not a concern.

Loki closed his eyes and gasped. "I release you from the wager, Thor, you need not-" Thor squeezed harder and Loki stopped talking in favor of making more interesting sounds. He offered no more words until Thor decided he was slick enough and moved to straddle Loki's hips. Once again Loki was shocked. "Thor, you - you haven't before, we should - should-"

"You said you wanted to be on your back tonight." Thor had already begun to impale himself, and Loki's silver tongue seemed to have entirely deserted him. Thor paused after the first breach; it hurt more than he had expected. But Loki had received this thousands of times from him, Thor could certainly endure it if Loki could. He lowered himself bit by bit, trying to make his muscles yield inside, relishing the sight of Loki beneath him, sweating and groaning, trapped and even helpless just as much as if Thor were impaling him as usual.

Once he had enfolded Loki entirely, he found that the pain ebbed swiftly, and it wasn't long before he started to understand what Loki had enjoyed so much so many times from him. Now he wished he hadn't waited so long to find out. It was more intense in some ways, always hurting just a bit, driving the sensations higher. The pleasure coiling up from his stomach seemed less controlled than his usual experience, he felt almost dizzy from it. And Loki was digging his fingers into Thor's hips and writhing beneath him and almost sobbing for breath. Perhaps Loki's plan had been to drive Thor to admit that he wanted to be mounted for a change, to bend him over and master him for once, but Thor was triumphant as always.

Loki cried out under him as if he were the one in pain when he climaxed. Thor moved to lie beside him and gathered him in his arms, kissing his forehead gently.

It was a long time before Loki spoke. "Next time, we are going to do it in the position I originally decreed."

Thor knew he would give in, sooner or later, but he said, "Why should I allow that? You forfeited your forfeit. You gave up your chance."

An only too familiar calculating look appeared in those green eyes. "Another wager, then?"

"I should know better than to accept wagers from you."

"Yes. You should. But you don't."

Thor reddened and shot a look at Diana. He had no reason to think the attitudes of Amazons were
any different from those of the rest of Midgard.

Loki was leering at her. "Did my upright heroic brother tell you of our incestuous relations? How for centuries, not knowing I was not his brother by blood, he rutted with me almost every night? What think you of your ally now, Amazon?"

Diana's frown showed only slight puzzlement. "But that was before you turned to evil, was it not? Why should Prince Thor be ashamed of having been your lover when you were still a good man?"

Loki looked very put out at this reaction. "I thought you humans considered coupling with one's kin the vilest kind of abomination." His tone was peevish.

She still looked only puzzled, as if she did not quite understand what Loki was trying to say. "But you are gods. It is ever so with gods. All of the Titans were siblings to each other and they married other Titans, and almighty Zeus married his sister Hera. Adonis was born of Myrrha and her father Theias. The laws of mortals do not apply to gods."

Thor smiled. Loki gave him a sulky glare.

"I think we may begin now, Hippolytesdottir. Brother, you may as well sit and be comfortable. There is no escape now."

Loki shot him a look of pure venom, but stalked to a chair and seated himself. Avoiding their eyes, he drew a breath, and then the lasso was around him.

As soon as the lariat had settled around him, Loki raised his eyes to Diana's. He must have had these words prepared. "Diana Hippolytesdottir, attend me. It is in your best interests, all of you, not to know the truth behind the lies I have told. My lies are sometimes cruel, but they are ultimately for your benefit."

Loki stopped and waited. Diana tilted her head, regarding him.

Thor was uneasy. "Perhaps we should stop. If he says it in your lasso, must it not be the truth?"

"No, Prince Thor. In the lasso, people do not speak the truth. They speak what they believe to be the truth. Do you think we are really better off believing his lies?"

Loki's scarred lips twisted and he visibly steeled himself. "Brother," Loki emphasized the word, which he had not applied to Thor since learning of his true parentage, "stop this if you ever loved me at all, if you ever felt one shred of."

"Do you truly believe I do not love you?" Thor burst out.

"Of course not," Loki answered at once. "I know that you love me. I have never doubted it for an instant."

Then he stopped, eyes widening, and stared down at the lasso, appalled. His right eyebrow quirked upward.

Joy blossomed in Thor's heart. "And Loki, do you still-"

"Do not ask me that!" Loki roared. Then, with more control, "Have some mercy."

Thor let it drop. For the moment.

"Why are you so afraid of speaking the truth, Prince Loki?" Diana asked gently.
He sighed deeply but could not refrain from answering. "Because it will destroy all I have accomplished."

Chapter End Notes

Of course, no one can "seduce" a woman like Diana, that's just Thor teasing poor Steve.

This is the George Perez version of the Cheetah.

Queen Audrey of Casnia is from the Justice League animated series. In it she and Diana indeed have a (very femslashy) friendship, and Vandal Savage did make an attempt on her throne.

I got into a discussion on tumblr a little while ago about whether Loki would be on top/pitching with Thor or not. I think their body language together in Thor makes it pretty clear that Thor is the top in that pair, whether he's pitching or catching at the moment. Another person's contention was that Loki's issues with having lived in Thor's shadow would have made him unwilling to be the receptive or submissive partner in bed with him. I think that Loki does want to be submissive to Thor sexually, but given their various issues and that Loki is such a strong if warped person on his own, it probably bothers him that he wants to, and has for a long time. (That kind of internal conflict about one's own desires seems to be something of a fictional kink of mine.)

And since there wasn't a place to mention this in this fic (maybe there will be in a sequel), I'll clarify it here: in this fictional universe, Thor is the only one who ever got that kind of submission from Loki. During the years Loki was running around with supervillains, he never bottomed to anyone, in any sense of that word. He kept the promise he made on their first night.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Loki's confession begins. The lasso of maudlin sentimentality. How Loki shooed Jane Foster away from his boyfriend.

There were so many things that Thor needed to know. Not only about Loki's current villainy, but about things that had happened long ago, where the record needed to be set straight once and for all. He had decided to go about it chronologically.

"Tell me why you let those frost giants into the weapons vault on the day I was to be crowned." Thor thought he knew, but he needed, needed to be sure after all these years of doubt.

Loki ground his teeth for a moment. "While Odin was delivering his speech, all I could think of was how I had striven to make him value me as much as he did you, love me as much. He should have known you were not ready, you were brash and vainglorious and your reign would have been a disaster. I had never wanted the throne, but I would have sat it so much better than you would have then and he could not see that. He could at least have told you that you needed me, that you should listen to me before charging about swinging your hammer, but he loved your foolish valor too much. I stood there listening to him sing your praises and thought of how it would tear at you when he took your prize away. When I took it away."

"You were right, you know," Thor said quietly. "I wasn't ready. You did me and all of Asgard a favor. Even those hateful lies - without them my banishment would not have done me nearly so much good. I am a better man for it. I am grateful to you, brother."

Loki looked exceedingly put out at these mature sentiments.

Thor continued, "I had thought that perhaps you did it to protect the realm, and me. That is what Sif and the Three claim you said."

"I did say it, and it was true." Loki's voice was shaking, either with emotion or with an effort to suppress the confession. "Every word I said to you before the ceremony was true. I loved you too much to want to see you be a bad king. The thought of your cruel disappointment was almost more than I could bear, even as I relished every moment of it. That was why I insisted on sleeping alone the night before. Had I seen your joy that night I never would have been able to bring myself to shatter it, even though at moments I shook with anger at how much more you were given than you deserved."

Thor had tried to draw Loki into his room that night, but Loki had coyly refused, teasing him about how good it would be the next night if they were hungrier for it. "I have never bedded a king before."

"Or been bedded by one?" Thor had teased back.

"I intend to do both before the week is out."
"I didn't know then that I was giving up my last chance to have you." He sighed. "That day, seeing how damned radiant you were, had it been possible to call off the scheme I would have. But I had set the plan in motion early that morning, and nothing could be done by then." Loki spread his hands. "I knew I would have second thoughts. So I made certain I would not be able to give in to them."

After years of hearing only taunts and fury from Loki, this acknowledgement of what they had been to each other was a painful relief, despite the anger mixed with it. Still the words were alarming. Thor had thought that since losing Loki, he had come to understand Loki's hurt, but it began to look as if it were a far more tangled thing than he had suspected.

"And then. When I was banished and you found out that you were...."

"A frost giant." Loki spat the words. He still hated this truth, Thor knew.

"Why did you lie to me about Father being dead, and my exile being permanent?"

Loki's hands closed into fists. "You mean, why did I betray the brother who loved me? For the father who didn't."

"Loki, he does love you. I won't deny that I have always been his favorite, but had you seen his grief when we thought you dead, you would no longer doubt his love for you."

Loki snorted softly. "More likely he mourns his own folly." When Thor drew a breath to remonstrate, Loki cut him off. "Thor, when I found out that I was a... a frost giant, I asked him why he had taken me. He said he thought that he could use me to unite the realms of Asgard and Jotunheim and create a lasting peace. Now, how do you suppose he might go about doing that?"

Thor started to speak, then frowned. 

"Had one of us been a girl, the path would have been obvious. A marriage between the two royal houses, and then one day, Odin's grandson rules both realms. But we were both boys. What was he planning, do you suppose?"

Thor was trying to think. "Perhaps... if Laufey died, then you could take the Jotun throne, and you would love Asgard enough to make peace with it."

"Do you think that was his plan?" Loki asked quietly.

"No," Thor confessed. The idea was too vague for one of Odin's plans. "But I cannot see...."

"Think about it, Thor. I too am a crown prince." He smiled tightly. "An eldest son. Indeed, now that I have slain my true father, I am the rightful king of Jotunheim. Imagine, a king of Jotunheim educated in Asgardian values, loyal to Odin, craving Odin's approval and affection."

Thor winced at those last words. Surely his father, always so loving, could never have deliberately given Loki less affection than he needed toward the calculated end of having a loyal puppet king on the throne of an enemy realm.

"Did you never wonder why he approved so of our being lovers? He saw it as another way to secure my loyalty to Asgard. He wanted me needing the king's approval and the prince's love."

Yes, Odin could. Not out of cruelty but for the good of Asgard, though it made Thor sick to think of it. And for the first time in his entire life, for one moment Thor did not want to be king.
"No doubt he thought he was doing me a favor," Loki was saying coolly. "Cultivate my jealousy carefully over all the centuries, train me to strive to be as Aesir as possible, and then, one day when the time was right, the happy news: I am an eldest son after all, I get to be a king just like my big brother."

And now that Thor had seen it spelled out, he knew that it was true, and that he would never be able to forget it. Would never be able to see his father in quite the same way.

"You were never a pawn to me," he offered. "Never an alliance or a strategy. To me, you were always only Loki."

Loki's gaze turned inward for a moment the way it did when he grasped some puzzle he had been pondering. "And that, dear brother, is why I have always loved you so much."

Thor's heart leapt, but before he could speak, Loki went on.

"Let me ask you a question, Odinson. When you found out that I was a Jotun, what did you think?" There was the smallest hitch in Loki's voice before he said the hated name of his species. "Tell me the truth."

Thor tried to put a name to the mix of emotions he had felt when Odin had told him. "I was so sorry. It must have been so hard for you. I wished that I had been there when you found out, so that I could have told you that it made no difference, that you had proven your worth a thousand times over, that I loved you no less."

Loki blinked at him. "Do you see why I love him, Princess? Why everyone loves him?" Loki asked her. Then his eyes widened at his own words, and Thor smiled widely with tears in his eyes. Loki's gaze flitted to his just for an instant.

Diana was tearful and smiling too. "Then, you did not truly live in your brother's shadow?" she asked kindly.

Loki looked at her. "Shadow? Thor is the sun. I lived in the light and warmth he radiated. We all basked in it. I would crawl across a desert on my hands and knees to be touched by my brother's shadow." Loki looked disgusted as soon as he was finished saying it, and glared down at the lasso. "Are you certain this is not the lasso of maudlin sentimentality?"

"Loki, I too love you enough to-"

"Yes, but you are a fool." Then, it seemed the lasso would not even allow habitual exaggeration, because he was babbling about how Thor wasn't really a fool, he merely behaved like one sometimes. A lot of the time. About certain things. Like what a sane person will do for someone he loves, as if they aren't just going to disappoint you anyway, and for the love of her gods, could the Amazon please ask another question so he could stop jabbering like this?

It was Thor who asked, however. "Tell me why you did... well, all that came after that. Lying to me about Father being dead and my exile permanent. Sending the Destroyer after me."

"Because I went mad."

Thor glanced at Diana, but she was only attentive.

"I do not claim it as an excuse, only a reason," Loki continued, looking down at his hands. "My reasons make sense, but I never would have done any of it on any other day of my entire life. I told you those lies because I wanted to hurt you, because I believed - I had no doubt - that when you
found out you had been lying with a frost giant for all those centuries, that you would hate me. I was getting a bit of pre-emptive revenge. And, yes, punishing you for being Father's favorite, now that I knew how hopeless my efforts to win his love had always been. It was the first time I ever let myself be controlled by my emotions, as most people are, and of course it led to complete disaster." He kept his eyes down and his voice was very soft. "For what it is worth, which is very little, I am sorry."

Thor was quiet for a long minute. "How can you love me and hate me so much at the same time?"

"Look at yourself. How can I not?"

Thor's nature was cheerful and straightforward. This tangled mass of conflicting emotions was hard for him to comprehend. He could only grieve that the strength of his love had not, after all, been enough for his brother.

"Tell me something else," Loki spoke up. "What did you think, when you learned what I was doing during your banishment?"

"When Sif told me that Father was still alive, at once it was clear that you were up to something. At that moment I thought - of course I knew you were envious of me for being Father's favorite. I thought you were simply seizing the chance to be the favored son for once. And that your lie about Father was intended to keep me out of the way, where I could not claim the throne. Or was perhaps just a bit of malice."

"Even then, you knew I was capable of that." Loki's tone was resigned.

"I know you, Loki. Liesmith, Silvertongue, God of Mischief. I didn't love you because I imagined you were infinitely kind and generous." A quick, unhappy laugh escaped Loki at that. "Then when you sent the Destroyer, well... I thought that was because of Jane." Loki's eyes snapped to Thor's. "I didn't know what else had happened, that you had just learned that you were not Odin's son by blood, that you were a Jotun."

"I would not have killed you just for dallying with some female. Even for caring for one. If I had been that upset I would have killed her."

"Loki-"

"I will not harm your astrophysicist." Loki said the word as if it were an especially rude way of saying "ugly, diseased prostitute".

"You did something to her, though. You made her leave me. Did you tell her some lie-"

"No. I told her the truth."

Truth could be a surprisingly powerful weapon. Jane had backed away as soon as Loki had appeared in her trailer, as if being a foot or two farther away might do her some good against an Asgardian sorcerer. "What do you want?" She sounded as angry as she was afraid. Grudgingly, he gave her points for bravery. And beauty, was the greedy woman not content with having one of the sharpest minds on Midgard, she had to addle the wits of men - and gods - with her looks as well?

Aloud, he said with a charming smile, "Only to visit the mortal woman who has caught my brother's eye. I mean you no harm." And he didn't, even though he hated her hated her would happily have torn her into a thousand pieces and set the lot ablaze and laughed as they burned.
"Yeah, well, I've heard a lot about you. You'll excuse me if I don't believe you." She had stopped backing away, still wary.

"Do you know what my brother would do to me if I harmed one hair on your pretty head?"

She grinned a little despite her fear. "He would hammer you into a pancake."

"Quite so. And so I shall not harm you. Anything for a quiet life." An instant later, there were ten of him standing about her in a circle. "And if I did mean you harm, you would not be able to escape it, so do compose yourself. I only wish to talk."

"So talk."

He let his doppelgangers dissolve. "I merely wondered what your plans for the future were, Dr. Foster." Letting his eyes grow colder, he added, "Your plans regarding my brother."

"That's none of your business."

He let his smile fade away completely, and whatever she saw in his face made her blanch. He had enjoyed that, frightening this insignificant mortal girl who had tempered Thor in a few days on Midgard as Loki had not been able to in centuries of reasoning with him. "Never tell me that my brother is none of my business, mortal. Remember to whom you are speaking."

She had drawn in a breath, steeling herself to reply calmly. "We haven't made any plans. Not yet."

Loki surveyed the cramped room, letting his eyes rest on the unwashed dishes piled in the sink, the rumpled laundry spilling out of its bag, the dusty haphazard piles of books and papers. "Mm. He can hardly be blamed."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you not understand what an Asgardian is? We are gods, Dr. Foster. Behold."

With a flick of his wrist he had summoned images of her and of Thor, both of them beautiful and young and in the prime of life. "This is the two of you as you are today. A lovely couple, don't you think?" His voice and smile oozed charm.

He moved his hand and the images began to shift. "This is the two of you a year from now. Two years. Three years."

Her eyes flickered from the images to him, understanding already. Mortals were fascinating; tell them something they were already fully aware of, and you got all sorts of reactions out of them. She could not look away as her image changed, the skin sagging, the hair whitening, her back bending. In a detached tone Loki described the changes, the way the cartilage kept growing, the calcium leaching from the bones, the muscles gradually wasting away. He even showed her how her body would decay after her death, which was admittedly a bit petty. And through it all, Thor remained exactly as he was now, young and strong and oh so beautiful.

When he was done, he said nothing more, just waved the images to nothingness with a little smile and walked towards the door. She held still, staring at the spot where the images had been, looking sick.

"Why did you do this?" she whispered as he was stepping through the door.

He paused for one instant, a dozen possible replies on the tip of his tongue. He even considered the
"Why now?" Thor asked. "For years you left her alone."

"For years I have been lying with one supervillain after another, any of them who would be useful to me. I made those alliances with ulterior motives, but still I hoped that I might find some man or woman who could make me stop thinking about you. At least for a little while. A few months ago, when you kissed me that time on the rooftop, I realized that it was useless. That I could not continue to dally with anyone who was not you. And if I cannot find diversion, neither will you."

Thor paused for a moment, collecting his thoughts. "Are you still mad?"

"Yes," Loki answered simply. "Somewhat, at least. Not enough that it could count as any sort of excuse for my actions. I was completely mad during your banishment. In my right mind, I would never have set the Destroyer on you and your friends, or tried to destroy an entire realm. Or told you that Father - your father - was dead, or challenged you to combat, as if I didn't have centuries of sparring practice telling me I couldn't possibly beat you. But after that - you know that I only tried to invade Earth with the Chitauri because I had no other way of escaping from Thanos. I tried to anger him and his henchmen enough to kill me, but unfortunately, I am very hard to kill. And yes, I sabotaged my own supposed invasion. I wanted you and your band of humans to stop me." He closed his eyes for a second and sighed. "When you arrived to help, I could not believe it when you...." For a moment, Loki could not speak. "Even if you did not loathe me for being a - a Jotun, I had given you every reason to hate me, but you did not - I never expected that. When you asked me to just give it up and come home with you, when you offered to help me stop it, I would have given anything in the Nine Realms to do as you asked. But I couldn't. Thanos could torture me from realms away, until Agent Romanoff destroyed the sceptre." He shuddered, and Thor found that his grip on Mjölnir was tightening, as if there were something present he could smite to vanquish his brother's fear.

Loki drew a breath, straightened, and looked Thor in the eye. "I think I am still a bit mad, but nonetheless, everything I have done since the Chitauri invasion, I did of my own free will."

It was a long moment before Thor was able to ask, quietly, "Why?"

And then Loki's eyes looked bleakly defeated. It was a triumph in which Thor could take no joy. Loki looked down at the lasso as if hoping it might have changed into an ordinary rope in the last few seconds. Then he drew a deep sigh, and confessed with the utmost reluctance.

"To save the Nine Realms from destruction."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

What happened to Loki in between his fall from the Bifrost and his invasion of Midgard. The purpose of his villainy since then. How he lifted Mjölnir. Oracle adds to her collection of home movies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For his answer to make sense, Loki explained wearily, he would have to tell Thor the entire story, starting from the night he had let himself fall from the Bifrost.

Loki had expected, and wanted, to die. Instead, he had fallen through the wormhole to a world called Apokolips, ruled by a godlike despot called Darkseid.

Apokolips was a hellish world, populated largely by beings from various worlds who were held prisoner until they could be broken by Darkseid's lieutenants and forged into his weapons. Perhaps a third of the scars upon Loki's body had been left there on Apokolips.

For a talented liesmith, pretending to have been converted to Darkseid's cause was simple enough, and the torments had, not ceased, but decreased. Loki had been a part of the force sent to conquer Thanagar, a world of winged warriors.

Though he had been granted no authority in the invasion, he had found an opportunity to sabotage it, having carefully hidden the extent of his magic from Darkseid. With his well-timed aid the Thanagarians had defeated Darkseid's forces and granted Loki sanctuary as his reward.

"I wasn't certain they would," he confessed. "Traitors are by nature untrustworthy. How could they know I would not do the same to them? They might have been cautious enough to execute me. But they did not."

Thanagar's was a culture of battle and honor, much like Asgard's. Loki had felt right at home, and ingratiating himself with people he understood quite well had been easy. Asgard had known him since he had been a sly child with an unmanly aptitude for magic. Thanagar did not have this advantage and he had played them with ease. "I didn't even have to lie. Well, not very much."

Thanagar had savored Loki's recitation of Asgardian tales of valor. "They especially loved hearing my stories of the mighty prowess of my foster brother," Loki told him. "They would pour wine into me and clamor to hear more." He had made one particular friend, a winged shield-maiden called Shayera Hol. "I so wish you could have met her. You and she were kindred spirits. Perhaps one day you will meet her in Valhalla, may that day be far off."

"She is dead?" Thor asked, tentative.

"They are all dead."

Loki had told the Thanagarians everything he knew about Darkseid, helping them to prepare for another attack. This was the only time when his mask as the scion of a world with a warrior code had
slipped; he had tried to tell them that honest fighting was not enough against a foe with Darkseid's kind of malice, and not all the Thanagarians had been able to accept this.

Still they had heeded his words enough that he had hoped they could withstand Darkseid's next onslaught. And perhaps they could have, but the next attack had not come from Darkseid, but Thanos.

The Thanagarians were wiped out by the Chitauri. Not a one of them remained alive. Thanos was quite literally in love with Death, and had once sent half the living creatures in the galaxy to her. Loki they had kept out of curiosity when he did not die as easily as his hosts. When Thanos had learned of his magical ability and knowledge, he had determined to make use of them. His intent had been to learn from Loki how he might conquer Asgard and plunder its weapons vault, which would make his power all but unlimited. There were difficulties to this. Asgard was far away and the technology and magic at Thanos's disposal were not enough to get an army there. Then Loki had thought of the Tesseract and formed his desperate plan. Another sabotaged invasion, this time with Loki at its head. All he had had to do was claim he wanted the Earth as his prize and Thanos and his minions believed everything else he said. Their power-lust was such that they could not imagine that anyone else did not share it.

"Are you saying you do not wish for power, Loki?" Thor chided him.

"I do not want his idea of power. He wishes only to murder and oppress. He understands nothing else." Loki shook his head. "Everyone was fooled. Even you. Did you really believe I wanted to rule Midgard? You know what humans are like. Much more trouble than they are worth."

"So we were right, later? You never intended for the Chitauri invasion to succeed?"

"Of course I didn't." Loki looked down at the lasso pointedly. "I hoped you at least might figure it out, not from cleverness but from knowing me so well. I tried to alert you by saying things that you knew weren't true - accusing you of hurling me into an abyss, when I let myself fall into it. Calling myself the 'rightful king of Asgard' - by what possible measure? I am not even Odin's younger son, I am not an Asgardian at all! I tried to hint at my real purpose by mouthing the silliest cant I could think of. Freedom from freedom indeed. Did you believe I really meant any of that guff?"

"I thought your mind still addled. The last time I had seen you you were quite mad."

Loki sighed. "True enough. And having gone mad, I was a far worse king than you would have been." He gave the lasso a sour look at the admission. "Still, my plan worked - barely. I got Midgard's heroes good and angry and they stopped the invasion for me. But only just. Even with me sabotaging my own supposed conquest. I thought I was being too obvious, but apparently not. I hoped one of you would stop us before the portal was opened. I hoped the Chitauri would never get here. I could not believe some of the blundering the humans did."

"They were unprepared."

"No, they were foolish. Do you remember your arrival? You stole me from your own allies, and three of you set to brawling with each other while I sat and watched." Loki could not suppress a sly grin, and it hit Thor in the gut with how much he had missed Loki flirting with him. "Not that it wasn't lovely to watch you fighting over me. Made me wish that when you were done beating them up we could steal away for a bit." Thor turned red. Diana only looked seriously attentive, as she had from the beginning. "But it was so foolish of you all. I could easily have escaped had I wished to while you and your allies knocked each other about. And Stark is one of the smart ones, and even he could not think of any better way."

Loki slumped forward, weary. "Even then I knew what I might have to do, after. I was hoping that Midgard would prove me wrong, that they would respond intelligently to the invasion without my having to guide them every step of my defeat. But their ingenious plans included asking an honorable and goodhearted man to torture his own little brother, inviting a dangerous monster onto an aircraft, and murdering a few million of their own people and flattening one of their greatest cities in what would have been a stopgap measure at best.

"And Asgard was little better. Odin should have been interrogating me for every scrap of information I could give him about the threat of Thanos. Instead, he only came to listen to me once, and that was at your urging. He has grown complacent after too long without a worthy adversary. And you did not take me seriously either, you merely hoped that if he gave me a hearing then I would rest quietly. Even when Thanos did invade Asgard with the Chitauri, none of you stopped to think that perhaps you ought to have listened to me.

"The only reason Thanos and Darkseid and many others did not attack Asgard long ago is that they are too far away. There are more realms than just the Nine we know. Even without the Tesseract, they will find a way to reach our Nine Realms sooner or later. And from a few remarks Thanos and Darkseid and their henchmen let drop, I have reason to believe they are not the only monsters out there capable of subjugating or destroying the Nine Realms. There are others. Brainiac. Galactus. Possibly more." Loki gave a mirthless laugh. "It was a thorough education."

"So, your plan then was... what, exactly?"


This was why Loki's plans had never made sense to anyone on the outside. None of them were intended to be particularly successful. They were intended as practice, to train the realms in preparation for the eventual arrival of the fiends Loki had encountered through the wormhole. The trouble Loki had caused had not been in the service of any particular objective of his; the trouble had itself been his objective.

Thor grappled with the information in silence for a moment. "You know that SHIELD was trying to make weapons from the Tesseract. Why not simply steal it and give it back to them?"

Loki snorted. "Because they didn't have the slightest idea how to use it, or what it was capable of. They had barely started toying with it when an evil alien used it to invade their wretched realm. You can't just give machine guns to a troop of baboons and expect them to fend off an invasion. You have to get them to develop the tactics and weapons themselves or it is no use.

"It is the tactics that matter. The strategy. Barreling in relying on courage and strength and the power of good is not enough. Over the years that followed I was gravely disappointed at how frequently I defeated Midgard's heroes. But they are finally starting to learn. Even you, dear brother. A few years ago you would never have thought of letting a villain hold this lasso in safekeeping until you had need of it. I am so proud." The tone was sarcastic, but Loki was still in the lasso, so Thor decided to take the words at face value and grinned happily. "Oh, stop looking like that, you should have learned better long ago. Before I fell from the Bifrost, I tried to kill you and your friends and all of Jotunheim, not to mention usurping your throne, and what do you do when you think I'm hanging off the edge of the bridge? You rescue me! You try to help me up! Conveniently turning your back for me to slip a dagger in. That is no way to defeat Darkseid, brother. Or Thanos, or any of these monsters."

Thor shook his head. Loki had taught him a great deal. One day, he would teach Loki that only that kind of compassion between allies made it possible for them to stand together against evil. One day. "And you thought that embarking on a career as a supervillain would be more effective than just
"The truth?" Loki looked genuinely incredulous. "What does the truth have to do with it? It has to do with who people are willing to follow. You are the kind of man people follow into a realm full of frost giants thirsty for their blood. I am not and you know it."

"What does that have to do with-"

"Thor, during my brief inglorious reign as king of Asgard, your friends committed treason against me for your sake. As it happens, they were quite right to do so, but they did not know that. They thought that they were committing treason against the man who had saved their lives on Jotunheim just a few days before, for the sake of the man who risked them to begin with for his own vanity."

Thor flinched. It was true, all of it. He had not deserved the loyalty he had received. For years now he had been trying to make himself worthy of it. "They did it out of love for me."

"Precisely." Loki paused to let the words sink in. "I couldn't stop my own brother from marching into Jotunheim with only five warriors. I couldn't stop you from stealing cakes from the ovens before a feast when we were children. How am I supposed to convince the Nine Realms that bogeymen from beyond the stars are going to come after them and they need to start using their brains to anticipate threats instead of counting on whatever thunder god or Kryptonian or Amazon happens to be on hand punching his - or her - way through it?"

Thor smiled slowly. "You really were trying to save us. All the Nine Realms."

Loki gave him a narrow-eyed look. "Do not be too generous to me, Odinson. I am not a secret hero. I am a villain whose ultimate aims are... productive." Thor started to protest but Loki cut him off. "Could a truly good man do what I have done? If your nature were less headstrong and you had known what I learned in the Void, could you have done it? I didn't become a supervillain out of the goodness of my heart. I simply do not wish to see the Nine Realms reduced to a pile of cinders. It would be so boring. The realms need a monster to prepare them for a greater monster. Very well. I am willing and able to be that monster."

Thor shook his head, still smiling. "I cannot approve of your methods, but-"

"Your hammer does." Immediately Loki looked furious at himself.

"What do you mean?"

Loki fumed for another moment, and then allowed triumph to replace wrath on his face. Leaning forward, he closed his hand around Mjölnir's handle, and lifted it. And smiled like, well, like a little brother who had just gotten the better of the elder.

"How did you do that? Did you learn some new magic-"

"I've been able to lift it since I engineered the defeat of the Chitauri in New York."

Thor stared.

"When you insisted on holding vigil by my bed while I recovered... one night I woke up and you were asleep. I had just begun to be lucid again. I don't know what made me try it, but I reached for Mjölnir and picked it up." He laughed softly. "I wanted to wake you and gloat about it, and show our - Odin, but I knew the wise course was to keep it secret."

"You spent all that time in prison with Mjölnir on your chest when you could have just picked it up
any time?"

"Of course. Always hold back a trump card." Loki handed the hammer back to Thor. "I think the loophole was in the precise wording of Odin's enchantment upon the hammer. Every word is vital in such things. I think he enchanted it to be liftable only by 'his son', if his son was worthy. Calling me his son for so many years created a sort of sympathetic magic, which I am certain he did not expect. And evidently, your hammer approves of what I am doing."

"But - your methods-"

"It's a hammer, Thor, it isn't good at complex moral shadings. What it knows is that I am saving the Nine Realms from fiends who would destroy them all." Tremendous weariness suddenly showed in his eyes. "Sometimes I think that everything about my life was fated by the Norns to bring me to this point. I had to be doomed never to win my supposed father's love, or I never would have ended up falling through that wormhole. I had to be born devious and magical instead of brave and kind and strong so that I would grow into the sort of man who could trick the Nine Realms into readying themselves for a true threat. I have hated everything about my life except for you, Thor. But perhaps it was necessary that I live through all of it.

"You all would have found out what I was doing eventually. When the time came, when Darkseid and Thanos arrived. Then you all would have known that I was...." Loki gritted his teeth painfully, trying to stop the words. "That I had done it all for your benefit, that I had saved you all. I did it for you," he blurted to Thor, looking for a moment like a young boy again, full of love and hero-worship for his brother, and then scowled. "For everyone, for all of the Nine Realms. But mostly for you." He licked his lips, nervous, and looked away. "That is the only real good left in me, you know. My love for you."

Thor thought his heart would burst. "Loki... I could not be more proud to call you brother."

Loki turned his head away sharply, his eyes and jaw both clamping. Thor rose and very gently removed the lasso. As he handed it to Diana, he said, "Will you please ask Oracle to cease watching this room?" He should thank her, but that would wait. She nodded understanding, and as she turned away she caught a fleeting glimpse of Thor enfolding his brother in an inescapable embrace, and Loki burying his face in his brother's neck, hands clenched on Thor's shoulders.

They just held each other for a very long time, almost crushing each other.

Eventually their lips met, almost of their own accord. It was so strange that they had been apart for so long. On Asgard, sometimes they could barely stay out of each other's arms for the hours of daylight, talking with others, attending to business, training, their bodies yearning to mold together as if they were part of the same being which had been split in two and was trying to reunite its halves.

The scars around Loki's lips were distracting, the only thing unfamiliar about this. Thor drew back and touched them with a gentle fingertip, unable to say anything.

Something besides tenderness entered the next kiss. When it ended, seeing the question in Thor's eyes, Loki murmured, "Oracle will not turn off the cameras, you know. At most, she will arrange it so that only she can see the...." His voice trailed off as Thor leaned in to kiss a trail along his neck.

"Do you care?"

"Not one bit."

They moved slowly, reclaiming the familiar and long lost pleasures they had not shared in so long.
When they were naked, Thor paused. "Loki," he began, but could think of nothing to say, no way to ask, _Do you want the same things now? Have you been scarred by your memories? What do you need?_

Loki understood. Of course he did, Loki always understood. "It's all right, Thor," Loki said, his right eyebrow giving that little lift. "Sit on the edge of the bed. I have missed you so much I thought it would kill me at times...."

"I too," Thor groaned. He sat, bringing Loki to straddle him. He had intended more lingering, but Loki slid onto him and their mouths fused, and it had been years and they were _together_ again and Thor didn't know how he had lived without this. His eyes kept closing to better concentrate on the sensations, but always they flew open again to reassure himself that this was really Loki, that this was real. "Loki. Call me brother again."

"Brother." Loki twined his fingers in Thor's hair, kissed his brow, his eyelids. "You will always be my brother in my heart, no matter who birthed us and who sired us, I was a fool to ever think otherwise.-"

"I am never letting you go again, brother," Thor promised, and their mouths joined once more, and it was as if he had been maimed for years and suddenly was whole again.

And those long graceful fingers were playing over his skin as they used to, finding all the places they had mapped out so many times before, and those cool green eyes were drinking him in half closed and dazed with need, and then Loki threw his head back, the veins standing out on his neck and his features drawn taut and Thor had seen this thousands of times but it was as maddening as it ever had been and with it Loki conquered him at the same moment as he conquered Loki. And for a moment Thor almost believed that they really were gods.

After, Loki tried to put his silver tongue to lesser uses. "Thor, you must know that things cannot simply go back to the way they were. There has been too much-"

Thor put his hand over Loki's mouth, not gently. "Tomorrow, brother. No more words tonight."

Loki pulled Thor's hand away angrily, twisting his wrist just enough to hurt, but did not argue. He always had known when it was time to delay the battle.

Right before falling asleep, Loki allowed himself the tiniest of private smiles, hidden against Thor's golden skin. Really, his brother would never learn. Heroes were so wonderfully straightforward. Neither Thor nor the Amazon had thought to ask him what he meant to do with the Nine Realms _after_ he had saved them.

Chapter End Notes

Quite a few of you guessed exactly what Loki was up to, so I guess I'm not the Liesmith he is. I suppose it's a good thing I didn't plan on a career writing murder mysteries!

As with so much, my source of canon about Thanagar and Shayera Hol is the Justice
League animated series.

I extrapolated the nature of Mjölnir's magic from what we see in the movies. I mention this because Grey Bard informed me that it's different in the comics.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

A new jailor for the best escape artist in the Nine Realms. Peace negotiations between Loki and Midgard. Also, Loki is a snob.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They woke early the following morning and spent a few minutes idly caressing each other before Thor reluctantly sat up. "Likely I should...."

"Yes, you probably should go before they come banging on the door. We've been lucky to have this much grace." Loki pushed his long black hair back from his face. "No doubt the Amazon has already told her masters everything."

"She has no-"

"They are your masters too. Stop quibbling with words, both you and she heed their orders." Loki sighed. "They will demand an audience with me soon. Will you do me a favor? Please?"

"If I can." Thor reluctantly got out of bed and started dressing.

"Ah, how cautious you have become with your promises, dear brother. Will you bring me some suitable clothes? Stark's clever devices prevent me from conjuring illusions of them here and I will not meet with your masters in tattered armor or in prison scrubs." He held up the pyjama-like garments between two fingers, regarding them with distaste before pulling them on, resigned. "Bring me something else, of Asgard or Midgard, no matter so long as it is properly formal. Please."

Thor nodded. All he had to do was fetch them from Loki's room on his floor of the Tower.

Loki paused. "Will you do one other thing for me?"

"What is it?" Thor hoped it was something he could grant. Today he would give his brother the Nine Realms on a platter if he thought he would take good care of them. Which he didn't.

It was a moment before Loki spoke. "Try to convince them - Director Fury and his cohorts, or whoever it is you and Hippolytesdottir are reporting to - to allow me to continue with my plans."

Thor could scarcely believe it. Even for Loki, this was a tall order. "You cannot expect them to allow you to continue supervillainy! Be reasonable, Loki!"

"Why not? You yourself have said that Fury is a ruthless man with pragmatic principles. On the floating fortress he asked you to torture your own brother, remember? Is it not better for me to cause a bit of mischief than for the realms to be unprepared for entities more evil than I could ever dream of being?"

"They know now about the threats of which you speak. They shall prepare for them based on the truth, not on your tricks."
"Since when has anyone ever responded better to the truth than to my tricks?" Loki challenged. Thor could not answer, because so far as it went, it was true. Loki had been taught - Thor had helped to teach him - that no one would listen when he told the truth, and so he had become the God of Lies.

"You cannot expect me to allow you to continue committing these crimes, Loki."

And there was that old calculating look in those green eyes. "And suppose that Fury and his accomplices decide that my method is the one most likely to ensure the survival of Midgard and the other realms. Would you allow it then, at their behest?"

Thor had to think about that. "I would consider it," he said at last. "But you must know it is unlikely that they will agree."

"Thor, ask them to. It is in their own best interests, you must see that. The Avengers Initiative was abandoned until I showed up and snatched Fury's toy from him, and within a day the Avengers were ready to defeat an entire alien army. People respond best to tangible threats."

Unfortunately, Thor thought that Loki just might be right about that.

Loki saw him wavering and pressed his advantage. "Thor, please. Everyone else here regards me only as an enemy - quite rightly. You are the only one here who will speak for me."

"But I do not want you to-"

"Brother, please. I am all alone in this realm. I have only you to turn to."

Thor sighed. Loki had not forgotten exactly how to manipulate him, even calling him "brother" again, and yet, what he said was true. "I will tell them what you have said. I will not try to convince them that you are right."

Loki would have said more, but Oracle's voice emerged from the intercom. "Thor, if you're ready to leave, we have a jailor ready."

"Damn. Now they know I can lift your hammer, I'll have to endure being chaperoned by one of your overmuscled friends. Let's see who drew the short straw."

The doors opened, and the unassuming form of Bruce Banner entered, carrying a small bag. "Sorry, Loki," he said mildly. "It seems they think we should be roommates for a while."

Loki went tense all over. The Hulk was one of the very, very few entities of whom the god of mischief was actually afraid. He turned to appeal to Thor. "Thor, you cannot leave me, your own brother, alone with him."

"You dropped me 30,000 feet in a steel cage."

"As if that could harm the mighty Thor. Did you not notice that I made sure you had your favorite toy with you?"

That was true. And Loki's eyebrow was doing its little quirk. Thor was going to have to be careful that Loki never found out how that affected him. "All you need do to remain safe from Dr. Banner is hold that silver tongue, Loki."

"Thor-"

"Cause no more trouble, brother. I will bring you suitable clothing as soon as possible."

Thor hefted
Mjölnir and left, Loki's accusing gaze following him.

After a moment, Loki looked sidelong at Banner, not moving his head, and said softly, "No offense."

Banner gave one of his lopsided smiles, not looking directly at him. "None taken. Why don't we do this the easy way?"

"Which is what?" Loki continued to hold still and speak softly, as if worried about spooking a wild animal.

"I'll sit over here and do some reading, and you don't try to escape or anything, and the other guy doesn't make a mess."

"Very well." Loki went to the bookshelf, movements slow and measured, and took down The Count of Monte Cristo, which seemed appropriate. "If you get bored with whatever you've brought, you're welcome to read anything of mine. I have the complete Harry Potter series. British edition."

"Is that Twilight on the end of the shelf?"

"If you're going to read that, please wait until I'm on another planet."

When Thor entered his brother's cell that evening, Loki looked up from his book and waited, not deigning to ask.

"I will not see you for a few days, brother," Thor said reluctantly. "They will not permit me to until they have decided what to do about you. But I insisted on at least telling you so. If I stay for more than one Midgardian minute Princess Diana is going to come in and drag me out."

Loki stood up. "Let me speak to them. They cannot have grasped how important it is that I be allowed to continue-"

Thor held up a hand, shaking his head. They had been very clear about not being willing to listen to more words from the God of Lies. "They are not fools, Loki, they grasp your strategy quite ably. They need their wits unaddled by your silver tongue."

"Silver? How about reasonable?" Loki shot a quick glance at Banner and quieted his tone. "Brother, please, tell them that-"

Thor laughed ruefully, putting his hand on the side of his brother's neck, a gesture he had terribly missed making. Loki delighted him by instinctively leaning into his hand as of old, as if all the years between had never happened. "This is why they will not allow me to stay here." He did not want to leave, but he did.

Four days later (Loki had reread The Count of Monte Cristo and had started on Delirium's Mistress), while Loki and Banner were eating breakfast they were informed that Director Fury would be coming to his cell in one hour. Loki pushed his half-full plate away and set to taming his hair into a more princely fashion. He would have preferred to cut it, but he would not give the humans the satisfaction of refusing if he requested scissors. Instead he brushed it until it was sleek and used the little black tassel from one of his bookmarks to tie it back. Thor had made good on his promise to provide proper clothing. Not armor, of course, and no metal ornaments that might be turned into weapons - as if Loki's most formidable weapons were not in his very being, separable from him only
by death - but still the leather-and-silk formal garb of Asgard, black and green sentimental fool probably had a whole wardrobe for Loki in his chambers in case he suddenly reformed.

When Loki was finished, he studied himself critically in the small mirror over the sink. For years he had kept himself unkempt most of the time because it frightened humans, for some reason. Now he needed to look like a prince again. He would have given much for proper jewelry, or a respite in the illusion disruptors Stark had been so clever about. But the way a man held his head said far more about his station than any adornments. Banner's eyes were on the scientific journal he was reading, but he had probably concluded by now that Loki was hopelessly vain. Let him. He was only a human, and a commoner, he could understand nothing of such matters.

Loki had plans for Bruce Banner. Recently one of the scientists of Midgard had hit upon something that might cure Banner of his transformations - Loki had been watching for this. All Loki had to do was see that Banner heard about it without leaving any trace of his own hand in it. The man was desperate to be shot of his true self. He would see the potential in the discovery, and use it to make a cure, and Loki would have one thing less to fear could have his revenge on the man. But no, with reluctance Loki discarded that last thought; even if the cure worked, such things had a tendency to come back under the right provocation. Best not to risk it.

Like slipping into a well-broken in pair of boots, Loki let the proud posture of a prince of Asgard settle upon him. Even after years of playing mad supervillain far more fun it was familiar and natural. Without the scars around his lips he might almost have been his old self. He hoped Thor would see him today. He had not seen Loki looking this elegant in years.

The cell was, as befitted a prison cell, on the spartan side, but Loki squared away what little clutter there was, lining his soap and shampoo up neatly, putting his current book on the shelf. Then he waited, standing as far away from the door as possible, hands clasped behind him, calculated to appear unthreatening, as if he would ever not be dangerous. Not that Fury would be fooled, but he should understand that at this moment, Loki was not intending to engage in battle. Now was the time for words, not combat.

And as he waited, he kept his thoughts on a tight leash, reminded himself: It does not truly matter what they decide and what they demand. There is no version of this in which I do not come out on top. Eventually. I wait only to learn what path I must take there.

Thor entered first. Well, of course they had to bring someone powerful enough to fight him if Loki had been enough of a fool to consider this an opportune moment for a prison break Midgard's supervillains must be idiots Loki should have given them lessons the bloody fools.

With the ease of long practice Loki concealed his disapproval when he saw that Thor was carrying a large box. What would their... Thor's parents say if they saw? The problem was that Thor was too fond of physical activity. It was all very well when he was at war, then seeing a prince digging ditches and washing with his own hands inspired the warriors - Loki had done the same on campaign, though not nearly as cheerfully as Thor had the things he did for Asgard - but it was inappropriate elsewhere. They would have words about it later. Not that he expected Thor to listen. He never had before.

Then again, he was lucky Thor had been allowed to come at all. There would be someone present who was on his side more or less.

Director Fury took a seat at the one table and Bruce Banner left for a much-needed break from godssitting. When Thor and Fury were seated and Loki was still standing regarding them, Fury took a sheaf of newspapers from the box and dropped it on the table, turned so that Loki could read them right-side-up.
He lowered his eyes to them. The one on top was one of the most respected papers in Midgard, and his photo was on the cover, an alarming shot of him in full armor, laughing, hair disheveled. The headline read, "LOKI OF ASGARD: VILLAIN OR SAVIOR?"

He felt his shoulders slump a bit. To cover the movement, he reached forward to flip the top paper aside. The stack turned out to be of the front pages of numerous Midgardian newspapers, in different languages, all conveying the true purpose of his villainy to the world, with of course long-winded debate over whether he had been right to do it, or more precisely, just how wrong he had been. He did not bother to read the debates over which rung of hell he belonged on; he hardly expected lesser beings to appreciate being swindled for their own good.

"By now, pretty much everyone on Earth knows what you were up to," Fury informed him. "And with a little help from your brother, we've informed the residents of the other 'Eight realms' as well."

Loki gave Thor a little glare, even though he had known Thor would abide by the foolish decisions made by his precious mortals. At least Thor had the decency to look abashed. As well he should. Putting the wishes of mortals before a fellow prince of Asgard, and his own lover and foster brother at that.

Fury continued. "Now that the world - all the worlds - know what you're up to, well. You can still cause a lot of trouble on your own, but now that your fellow bad guys know your game plan, I don't think they'll be as ready to play with you."

"Indeed, brother, several of them have already reformed and pledged to stand with us against the coming invaders!" Thor announced happily. Loki was pleased to notice that Fury joined him in giving Thor a withering look.

Loki sat down, trying to hide his resignation. Fury was right. A few villains would be conceited enough to think they could outwit him - he could easily imagine what Luthor would do if he offered him more mischief, arrogant enough to imagine he could beat him at a game Loki had been playing for centuries *that could actually be fun, Lex might even surprise him a bit before Loki was through checkmating him* and al Ghul would readily ally with him with the intention of later slipping a dagger between his ribs - but most would be too suspicious. The network of connections he had so carefully forged was now all but worthless. All that work, destroyed in a few days. The Nine Realms would never be ready in time now.

Loki would pay Fury and his cohorts back, one day, but that would require patience. He couldn't harm them, not when the realms needed their services. But one day he would irritate them enough to satisfy himself that he had evened the score. Opportunities had a way of providing themselves, for those who knew how to seize them.

No words he could say would be adequate to the moment, so he decided to say something irrelevant instead. People hated it when he did that. He remarked mildly, "I was under the impression that Midgardian custom required twelve for a trial."

"This isn't a trial," Fury said, sounding as usual as if he had been pushed to the limits of disgust with the universe. It was a feeling Loki could sympathize with. "These are more like peace negotiations."

"As between nations at war." Loki looked him over coolly.

"Exactly." Fury probably made most people feel like badly behaved children about to be punished. Most people who weren't millennia-old demigods, that was. "Keeping you locked up has been an enormous strain on our resources, requiring large investments of time on the part of our most powerful heroes, and we are aware that eventually you will escape again just as you have before.
You, Loki of Asgard, are too damn much trouble and we do not intend to be bothered with you any longer."

Thor studied his brother anxiously. He couldn't help noticing that Loki looked absolutely beautiful today. More like the Loki from before Jotunheim, but older, more seasoned, with more power leashed under his quiet exterior. Tied back, his sleek black hair fell, long and silky, halfway down his back. His manner, too, was more like that of the old Loki, cool and regal instead of crazed and feral. Even the scars around his mouth acquired a certain dignity from his bearing. He looked like a prince again.

Thor wanted to interrupt Fury and urge Loki to accept the terms that were to be offered to him, but centuries of training in court protocol restrained him. Anyone else would be sensible at a time like this, but with Loki, he never knew what to expect.

Loki seemed to sense his anxiety, however, because he gave him a thin smile and said, "There's nothing further here for a warrior. We drive bargains. Old men's work. Young men make wars, and the virtues of war are the virtues of young men: courage and hope for the future. Then old men make the peace. And the vices of peace are the vices of old men: mistrust and caution. It must be so."

Loki was using his quotation voice, but Thor still retorted, "I'm a year older than you, little brother."

Fury leaned forward across the table. "We're offering you parole, in your brother's custody." Loki's eyes lit with hilarity at that, but he said nothing. "The terms of your parole are as follows.

"First, as should be obvious, no more evil-doing. No more giving supervillains dangerous weapons, or spearheading invasions, or attacking superheroes, or otherwise causing trouble for the rest of us. Any time we think you're up to your old tricks, we will send every available cape after you. I'm guessing that now that we've ruined your plans, you'd like a break from being pummeled by Kryptonians and gamma-ray monsters every time you show your face.

"Second, you will give us any and all information you have about the various alien armies we're contending with, both your former allies and the big bads you say are coming.

"Third, I understand that you have knowledge of the secret identities of some of our heroes. You are not to in any way compromise their identities.

"Fourth, due to your unique knowledge of our enemies, you will serve SHIELD and the Justice League as a consultant, indefinitely. This means that you will be at our disposal to, among other things, help us figure out what these prospective alien invaders are up to whenever they show activity. We could use a strategic mind like yours on our side." At that, Loki's face froze for the most fleeting of instants, and Thor took note. Loki had always wanted people to listen to him about such things, to heed his counsel, and no one ever had. If Thor's allies on Midgard could give him that long overdue recognition, perhaps, just perhaps, in time it would help win his brother back fully to the side of good. Later he would speak of it to Fury.

Thor allowed himself to be hopeful. Loki was not the only son of Odin who could scheme.

"Fifth. As I understand it, your kind lives for thousands of years. So I'm thinking a fifty year sentence won't be too much."

Loki's face remained impassive. He had kept very still throughout Fury's recitation, like a reptile staying perfectly immobile until it is ready to strike. "More prison."
Fury shook his head. "Sentencing a supervillain is always... problematic. Keeping you locked up is prohibitively difficult. And after what Thanos did to you, well, we don't really have the stomach to dish out more of the same. So it's to be, shall we say, community service."

Loki laughed softly. "You're going to make me battle evil-doers with your tame heroes. You do realize I'll frighten the civilians to death?"

"Learn not to. And on every mission you'll be supervised by one of the heroes on this list." Fury slid a piece of paper forward. Loki ignored it.

"Do we have a deal, Loki of Asgard?" His voice packed a wallop.

"No," Loki said tranquilly.

Thor gave him an imploring look, not that he expected it to have any effect. Fury stared in outraged silence.

Loki gave a little chuckle after a long moment. "Really, you know my reputation. You have to have anticipated that I would negotiate every possible advantage for myself. What are you offering me, really? An easy stroll out of this place as opposed to an escape with tedious but not insurmountable difficulties. And, by the way, a considerable amount of collateral damage. The freedom to roam at will without worrying about being, ah, 'pummeled by Kryptonians', as opposed to the need to spend a few decades keeping a low profile until most of the Midgardians with a grudge against me are dead - not a great difficulty for a sorcerous immortal with a recently destroyed career. Not enough in recompense for the information and services - and restraint - you are demanding of me."

Thor was glad Fury was not looking at him that way.

Visibly gripping his temper, Fury growled, "And what is it exactly that you would consider enough 'recompense'?"

Loki gestured to the pile of newspapers. "What you have done is essentially tether me to a stake to attract hungry supervillains. My former allies are going to be after my head due to your meddling. If I am going to work with you, I am going to expect protection from them. To extend to my brother as well."

"I do not need-" Thor began, but Fury cut in.

"You'll both be entitled to the same protection as any members of a superteam."

"You have painted a giant target on me."

Fury glowered. "For as long as you are working on our side, protecting you and Thor will be the same priority for us as protecting civilians."

"How flattering. That is acceptable. Next, I want my sceptre back."

"Hell no."

"I can take it back. I request it as a courtesy to you."

"I don't believe you," Fury said.

The ensuing argument was long and tedious. Eventually, after Loki had outlined two ways in which he could indeed steal the sceptre back, the human grudgingly agreed that if Loki stole it back without
killing anyone or using it to mind-control anyone, it would not be considered a violation of the truce.

Next Loki pointed to the list of superheroes who were to supervise his "community service". "I am not taking orders from some human whose ancestors were living in mud huts when I marched into my first battle."

"Perhaps the phrasing should be more specific." Fury managed not to sound as if he were making a concession. "These, ah, chaperones are not there to micromanage you. They are there to keep an eye on you, so that if you get up to something unkosher, we'll know about it."

Loki picked up the list and finally read it, taking the time to look it over carefully. "Clarify that wording and remove the Amazon and Banner from this list. I will not work with either of them, exceptions to be made at my discretion."

Fury nodded curtly. "Done."

"No more lassoing me or sending the Hulk after me."

"Unless we suspect you are a threat."

"Too open to interpretation."

"Unless you turn villain again."

"Also open to interpretation."

"The Justice League has a written definition of a supervillain in its charter, if you would like to see it," Fury said, impatient.

"I would."

He looked up at the nearest surveillance camera and gave a nod. A few seconds later, a printout emerged from the wall. Of course Loki ignored it. A prince did not get up to fetch his own papers. As there were no servants present, Thor went to get them, hoping to avoid anyone taking offense. He found it less necessary to stand upon his dignity here on Midgard - indeed, in some cases it made a better impression if he did not - but then, Loki was used to having to fight for respect, something Thor had never had to do.

Loki let the sheaf of papers lie on the table for a moment before deigning to pick it up and read it. He took his time about it, too. Thor tried to have faith in his brother. Loki always knew best how to handle these situations.

Provided, of course, that what Loki wanted out of a situation dovetailed with what Thor wanted. But with Loki, he never had been able to tell. Now less than ever.

Loki laughed. "There is a whole section about mind-controlling Superman?"

"Keep your spear off of Superman," Fury growled.

"The fact is," Loki said coolly, "I abhor mind control. I only did it during the Chitauri invasion because Thanos required it of me. There is a reason I have never used the sceptre for that purpose again."

"Except on Superman."

"Yes, well. I'm afraid that in his case, my sense of humor got the better of me." A smile spread itself
over Loki's face, Thor thought against his will. Thor spoke up before Fury could take exception to Loki's inconvenient mirth.

"Do you have objections to the definition of supervillainy here, brother?"

Loki looked over it thoughtfully. "No, it seems reasonable enough. Now, to the next matter." Fury looked affronted that it wasn't over yet. Thor forced himself not to squirm. Loki took a blank sheet of paper from the pile of them on the table and began to write. "I have cultivated relationships with numerous alien planets with the objective of uniting them against common enemies in the future. I would rather all that effort not be completely wasted. When Earth is ready to discuss alliances with these worlds, I claim the privilege of being ambassador to them."

Fury stared, incredulous. "You aren't even a citizen of any Earth country and you want to be an ambassador?"

"I happen to be rather good at it when I'm not busy sabotaging hostile invasions." Loki finished his list and slid it to him.

"There are rather a lot of problems with that, just one of them being that the other world in question would have to be willing to accept you as an ambassador."

"Let me worry about that," Loki suggested.

"No, do not let him worry about that. You worry about it," Thor said. Loki shot him an aggrieved look. Thor went on, "My brother was always a talented diplomat, but dearly as I love him you must look to your own interests where he is concerned."

"I have extensive knowledge of the cultures of each of these worlds, as well as relationships with numerous powerful personages. Does anyone else on Midgard have that?"

"No," Fury said reluctantly. Another long, boring negotiation followed, and Loki let it rest when Fury had agreed to grant him the status of diplomatic attaché to the planets on his list.

"Next, I require-"

Fury cut in. "I think we've let you push us far enough already."

Loki regarded him coolly. "I think that it is only courtesy which brings me to pretend that you have much choice. I am willing to remain here while we get this sorted, but not for much longer. I prefer not to kill sentient beings when I escape from prison, but I think I have demonstrated that this preference is flexible. And while I have figured out at least three ways of escaping from this one, all of them will result in considerable loss of life."

Fury stared at him, outraged, and then abruptly turned to one of the cameras. "Oracle, would you please send Banner back to the ground? His services are... no longer required here."

Loki gave one of his glittering scarred smiles. "Alas, now I am down to two ways." He let the human fume for a few seconds before continuing, "I am prepared to be reasonable. Midgard will find me a valuable friend, but that friendship comes with a price. Though not, I think, an exorbitant one."

Thor once again wanted to browbeat his brother into cooperating, but he could see that Loki was right. He had the advantage here. The humans badly needed him to stop his villainy and could not force him to do so. He could, within reason, name his terms.

There were a few seconds of tense silence before Fury said through gritted teeth, "So tell us the rest
of your 'price', and make it snappy."

Loki inclined his head graciously. "Very well. Only one more item. I expect to be recognized by Earth as a prince of Jotunheim."

Thor looked at him, surprised. "Jotunheim? Why?"

"Because I am a prince of Jotunheim."

"What do you care about Jotunheim? You were going to-"

"I don't care about it. Ghastly place, you've seen it. But I am accustomed to being a prince. Now that I am known not to be Odin's son, I require recognition of the royal blood I do have."

"That's no skin off our asses," Fury said, looking perplexed as to why this was a priority, "but you know that royal blood doesn't mean much in most parts of 'Midgard' these days, and I don't think the frost giants give a damn who we recognize as their prince."

"Regardless of how you humans have foolishly devalued royal blood at the moment, it matters a great deal to me."

"Fine. You're the prince of Icicle Planet. Have fun with that."

"Loki, you know you are still a prince of Asgard, regardless of your birth-" Thor began.

Loki ignored him. "Shall we sign?"

"Not just yet. Your reputation does indeed precede you. We will require a few days to examine all the concessions and terms you've requested."

For the first time all day Loki's face showed frustration, quickly concealed. "In that case, I want my brother to be permitted to visit me here. We have been apart for long enough."

"One hour each day." Fury did not look open to negotiation. Thor wondered how much he knew about them.

Loki smiled coldly. "You have learned from me. A pity people only take such precautions when I mean no harm."

"Yeah, ain't that a shame." Fury stood up, gathering the sheafs of papers. Thor helped. Loki didn't.

Chapter End Notes

There's a lot of abridged versions of The Count of Monte Cristo out there, but Loki is reading the complete one, which is very, very long. Delirium's Mistress is by the illustrious Tanith Lee and includes daddy issues I think Loki would identify with.

Loki's quotation, "There's nothing further here for a warrior. We drive bargains. Old men's work. Young men make wars, and the virtues of war are the virtues of young men: courage and hope for the future. Then old men make the peace. And the vices of
peace are the vices of old men: mistrust and caution. It must be so," is from the movie
*Lawrence of Arabia.*
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Loki shows Thor his lair. Makeup sex ensues. Loki's head is still a bag full of cats.

Three days later, Fury returned with the revised agreement. Loki spent an hour quibbling over tiny matters, Thor suspected just to be difficult, before finally writing at the bottom of each page: *Loki Laufeyson*. Thor wanted to object to the name, but did not care to risk anything going wrong with this treaty between his brother and Midgard. And then the pair of them were allowed to return to the Earth's surface, together.

On the ground, Thor slipped an arm around Loki's waist and hefted Mjölnir, but before he could take flight Loki put a hand over his. "Wait. Where are you taking us?"

"To Asgard, of course." Belatedly Thor realized that Loki might balk at this. "Our father has assured me that he wishes to mend things with you."

Loki did not disappoint. "Oh, yes. He is so eager to mend things now that I am no longer easy for him to control." Loki's mouth twisted bitterly.

Thor could think of no way to dispute that, so he continued, "And he has already agreed to our return in a few days for your 'community service' on Midgard."

"But he has to do something to me. You must know that."

Thor did, but could think of no more reassurances. If it was too dire, he promised himself, he would rescue his brother, even from their own father.

"Mother has been longing to see you."

Loki grimaced. "Playing dirty is supposed to be my game, brother. Very well, we will go tomorrow. But tonight we stay here." He met Thor's eyes, full of anger. "I warn you, I will not bend the knee to him again. I am not of Asgard. He is not my father and not my king."

Thor was going to remonstrate, but unusually, just the right thought came to him. "You were willing to accept him as your king when you needed to be protected from Thanos."

Loki's body went rigid, and after a long, tense silence, he said grudgingly, "Apparently I do have some honor left."

Foolishly Thor pushed it. "And he may have loved me best, but he did, and does, love you."

Loki's eyes were hard. "Let us talk about this no more tonight."

"Loki-"

"I am going back with you tomorrow. I shall behave while we're there. There is nothing more to discuss."
"You will?"

"You sound surprised."

"It has been some years since you behaved."

"I need a change of pace."

"We can go to the Avengers Tower tonight. That's where I live on Midgard. Stark gave each of us on the team our own chambers, we will have privacy if you do not wish to see the others yet-"

Loki smiled, not a happy smile. "I will have to see them soon, but tonight, my place."

Thor raised his hammer and they took flight, and Thor followed Loki's directions to a large, isolated house in a dry region of scrubby trees and russet soil. "Where is this?"

"Peru." Loki led Thor inside. It was a high-ceilinged house made of bronze-hued stucco, sparsely furnished but with ancient golden artifacts here and there, and in two little recessed shelves a pair of exquisite vases in Loki's favorite shade of green.

"It reminds me of home," Thor said, suddenly abashed at the thought of his cluttered rooms in the Tower.

Loki nodded. "That's why I chose it."

Thor paused at the doorway of one especially large room, which Loki had made into a library. Most of the books seemed to be of Midgard, new books with colorful covers alongside ancient crumbling tomes. Thor smiled a little, just because this was the brother he remembered, hoarding books as a dragon hoards gold.

"Yes, you'd best stay just outside the threshold of this room, one of the books might get you."

Thor laughed, his heart light at having his brother tease him again. "I think I have proven myself invulnerable to them." He turned to look at Loki. "Do you have magic things here as well?"

Loki's eyes were calculating for a second, but he answered. "Yes. In the basement. The door is concealed by magic."

"Will you show me?" At Loki's hesitation, he pressed, "Are you hiding something from me?"

Loki gave a little huff of brotherly annoyance. "Very well, just do not touch anything." He moved on to another room, an apparently dull room that only contained a couple of chairs and a table, and put his hand on the wall. Sure enough, a door appeared and Loki murmured an incantation to open it.

Thor followed him down the stairs and looked about. "What is all this?"

"Rare ingredients. A few artifacts of slight power." Loki gestured to a set of shelves on which a motley assortment of jewelry was arranged. "Magic is not plentiful in Midgard, I had more powerful talismans as a child on Asgard, but I have collected what I can to study." He waved at a yellowed old book that lay open on the large worktable. "I have been trying some of Midgard's traditional spells, but most of them are nonsense."

"And this?" Thor nodded towards an array of equipment that reminded him of Bruce Banner's laboratory.

"My experiments with Midgardian alchemy. They were on to a few things, but got distracted before
it really came to fruition."

Thor frowned. "Why would you want to turn lead into gold? You have other ways of acquiring it."

Loki shook his head, amused. "I am not after the gold, Thor, I am after the knowledge. Humans are so short-lived that most of them never have time to sort past the nonsense to get to the core of things. In order to learn from them I must sift through much dross myself."

Thor looked at a nearby shelf, which contained several neatly arranged fossils of creatures Midgard had long regarded as myths. "All you pursue here is knowledge for its own sake?"

Loki laughed aloud. "Are you disappointed in my supervillain's lair? Should I have arranged for a few lumbering henchmen, and some chained virgins for sacrifice in horrible rites? A few superweapons for wreaking havoc?" Loki gestured to Thor to follow him back up the stairs. "This is my refuge, Thor, not my lair. Humans have a vulgar saying about what they do not do where they eat. Speaking of which, let me put some less eye-catching clothes on you. I haven't had a decent dinner in ages."

With the magical laboratory sealed and hidden once more, Thor did not object when Loki waved a hand and attired them both in the contemporary garb of Midgard. "Did you never fear being recognized here? All Midgard knows your face."

Loki smiled, and his face abruptly changed into a different one. "You aren't unknown yourself. I'll give you a different face for the evening as well."

"Can you make it so that we can see each other's real faces? I want to see my brother. I've missed you."

The smile on Loki's strange face became tender, and a moment later it was his again. "A little tricky, but nothing I can't do. Let's go, it isn't too far to walk."

The walk took about half an hour, and Thor could see that Loki was enjoying being in the outdoors again. Small wonder, after spending so much time locked in a cell. Their conversation was desultory and about trivial things, as if they were any ordinary pair of brothers enjoying an evening of each other's company. They lingered over the dinner, which was indeed excellent though Thor still preferred the simple roasted meats and abundant fruit of Asgard. Loki, who had always had a sweet tooth, had two servings of cake topped with strawberries and whipped cream for dessert; Thor settled for stealing a couple of the strawberries, and Loki pretended to be terribly annoyed. After, they ambled slowly homewards. In the darkness, Loki took Thor's hand and they walked most of the way in silence.

As soon as they were inside, Thor's large calloused hands were on Loki's shoulders and then his powerful arms were around him and his mouth was opening Loki's and Loki had forgotten how Thor could make him feel. His bones were melting, he could barely stand and the room was spinning, without the support of those muscled arms he would have simply sunk to the floor. It was too much. Loki spread his fingers over Thor's chest, pushing him away the tiniest bit. He had to hold the sensations back just a little or he was going to drown in them. And Thor was not helping, he was carding the fingers of one hand through Loki's hair and nudging his knee between Loki's thighs, Thor still knew how to silence his mind and awaken everything else. Loki was had been a top-ranking supervillain and still Thor could dismantle him completely with a few kisses. It was disgraceful. All the nights he had spent biting his fingers and twisting in the sheets for wanting Thor, and now he had him again and he could scarcely endure it.
Thor released his mouth to nuzzle his neck, his beard tickling Loki's skin, and that sent sparks all through Loki's body. Loki gasped for breath. He should have spent this night alone, somehow convinced Thor that he needed some time on his own. He should have gotten a grip on his emotions before delivering himself into Thor's embrace again after all these years of being bereft of Thor's touch and Thor's presence and Thor's love all flooding over and through him. Loki's love, his need, were displayed openly on his face and in the way his body was melting against Thor's, he knew it. He needed to hide it, couldn't let Thor know just how utterly at Thor's mercy he was. He should stop him now. He should push away and tell Thor not to, that he needed time, that it was too much.

Thor claimed his mouth again and gently pressed his back to the wall. Loki wrenched his mouth away to tell him that they had to stop. Instead he murmured a spell and their clothing vanished. Thor gave a breathless little laugh and crushed him closer for an instant, large hands roaming deliciously over bare skin. Loki could not wait for Thor to decide it was time, Thor would not have everything his own way-

"Right here, against the wall, now," Loki demanded, and Thor moved back enough to give him a little smile. Bloody bastard, he didn't need to look so damned smug about it, of course he had won, he always won-

Loki's thoughts stopped in their tracks when Thor, still smiling, dropped to his knees. Loki could only stare as Thor swallowed his length without preamble. Thor had given him this favor at times in the past, but never in this subordinate position, he would never have done it had Loki dared to ask. "Oh," Loki managed faintly, and after a few seconds it was only Thor's powerful hands gripping his hips that kept him standing at all. Thor's eyes flickered up to his for a second, but Loki could only spare one tiny spark of anger at the triumph in them because pleasure was ripping through him at Thor's direction and Loki's body was too breakable to withstand it and it was going to kill him. Loki jammed his fist against his own mouth to stifle his cry. Still he gave far too much away.

Loki opened his eyes a minute - or possibly several hours - later and looked into the bluest eyes in the Nine Realms, just inches away from his own. Full of triumph, and love, and... gratitude? His dear brother could still surprise him. But he needn't look so bloody pleased with himself. Loki tried to straighten up, but his knees had dissolved and Thor held on to him.

"You've developed a taste for being knelt to," Thor's tone was gently teasing. The bastard. There was no need for him to gloat over the effect he had had. Loki managed a teasing grin of his own. Probably not a very convincing one, but it would have to do.

"Well. Maybe I won't make anyone else kneel before me so long as you do."

Thor's eyes crinkled and then he was gently urging Loki away from the wall. Was the insufferable brute going to carry him? Loki forced his legs to do their job. One step, another. To be sure, he seized Thor's wrist and moved ahead of him, pulling him to the stairs. On the way up Thor put a supportive arm around his waist. Loki decided to pretend he hadn't noticed the supportive part.

Thor tried to go into the first room at the top of the stairs, an elegant room with a huge bed piled with cushions and satin sheets. Loki tugged at his arm. "Not that one."

"No? It looks good for-"

"Yes, that's what I used it for. We're going to the room where I slept alone." If Loki had had any warning, he would have gotten rid of everything in that room, every candle and pillow and stick of furniture. He would make sure the room was empty before his brother saw it again. Pointedly empty, delivering a message Thor would understand with no words being necessary.
Understanding, Thor let himself be pulled along. Loki led him to his own room, a smaller one that held a small table piled with books and a bed just large enough for two people. For a pair of tall men like them it would be a bit crowded, but Loki didn't think Thor would mind. It might be rather nice, actually.

But damn it, this was out of the frying pan into the fire, because now he was in a room with Thor and a bed. And Thor had had no satisfaction so far tonight and surely would not be put off much longer. Loki should have insisted they share a drink first. He still could. He lifted a hand to conjure a bottle of wine from the kitchen, but Thor caught his hand, very gently, and kissed his palm, then pressed it to his bearded jaw. Then, instead of dragging Loki to the bed immediately, he stood back just a little, let his eyes roam all over Loki, then started running his fingertips lightly over Loki's skin. Oh, why did the infuriating man have to have the sense to slow down now? He never lingered like this, except when they had already coupled once or twice and were slowly working up to a third time.

Abruptly Loki snapped out of his daze, because Thor was gently tracing the numb skin of Loki's scars, sadness on his leonine face. Thor noticed the sudden tension of Loki's posture, but did not stop. After a moment he spoke softly.

"Is there no way your magic could...."

No, no he couldn't. He remembered acquiring every single one of these scars, he would not pretend that - that had never happened. He would never let anyone forget it and dismiss it never help them hide it from themselves never wipe out the proof and if Thor no longer found him beautiful then another overbrained lecherous Earth trollop could have her turn at exploiting hapless thunder gods.

Loki found that his own hands were spread protectively over the worst of the scars. With great effort he made his voice steady. "It could. I will not. I will never allow myself or anyone else to forget - any of it."

Thor nodded his acceptance, pulled Loki in close and raised a hand to trace the scars around Loki's lips before kissing him again. Now Thor's mouth was very tender, and Loki tried to keep his body tense, tried to stay wary, but Thor knew how to undo him too well.

And Thor knew he had disarmed him, because when he was done kissing him out of his mind he presumed to speak. "You are still beautiful, you know," he said softly. "Like the ruin of an ancient temple."

Oh, by the Nine. How could Loki ever have believed he shared blood with this fool? But relief insisted on sweeping through him with no permission whatsoever, and all he could do was shake his head and laugh. "You will turn my head with such sweet flattery."

"You are the one who is good with words." Thor leaned down, bending in what must have been a most uncomfortable posture, and started pressing gentle, sensual kisses along Loki's scars. Which just showed that Loki had been right, as usual; the scars were serving their purpose, reminding Thor that Loki was not quite the same man he had taken to bed so many times before.

But habit took over and Thor gripped one of Loki's wrists and gently twisted it behind him to pull him close, a familiar maneuver he had performed thousands of times, and tangled the fingers of his other hand in Loki's hair to pull his head back for more kisses. And familiar white-hot desire jolted Loki and his muscles were already easing themselves from long practice to receive Thor even as blind panic turned Loki cold and Thor's hand clamping his wrist was an immense cold iron chain weighing his hand down holding him to an uneven slab of rock underneath a star-crammed sky with the reptilian face of the Other looming above him Thor's hand in his hair was the guard's fist yanking
his head back so that Brokk could pierce his lips-

"Loki?" Thor had eased his grasp until it was scarcely there at all, was looking at him, worried.

Anger blazed through Loki. Those fiends had taken even this from him. He had loved feeling his brother's tremendous strength so much, loved being pinned down and ravished by him and now it was ruined. Everything was ruined.

Furious, Loki seized Thor's head in his hands and kissed him roughly. Too much had been taken from him and he would not lose this. Perhaps if he could persuade Thor to let him control this, at least for tonight, he could keep at bay the raw memories of being bound caged held down chained-

Loki tried to distract himself by filling his hands with every bit of Thor's sculpted body that he could reach, that flawless body he had missed so much. Every bit as perfect as he remembered, hard muscles rippling under golden skin. Loki tried to think of how he could frame his request. Usually in the past he had made this the prize in a wager; there was no time for that now. Other times he had teased Thor into it, whispering about how shocked everyone would be to see the mighty Thor allowing anyone to take him, enjoying it wantonly without shame, and Thor would be too dazed by the heated words to argue. Loki wasn't certain his tongue was silver enough for that tonight, he was too shaken by the love and terror and agonizing joy of having Thor back, he would probably start babbling all sorts of sentimental rubbish about deserts and shadows again.

Thor took his earlobe lightly between his teeth and teased it with the tip of his tongue. The effect was extraordinary, but Thor had never done that before. Had he learned that from her? Just what had that woman done to his brother? She was probably a pervert, scientists prided themselves on how open-minded they were, above the petty inhibitions of normal people, what depraved practices had the conniving woman induced his trusting, open-hearted brother to-

"Loki. Why don't you do it to me tonight?"

"What?" Loki blurted, startled. Thor was never the one to suggest this, well, almost never, Loki couldn't even remember how long it had been-

"Anything you want, Loki. You should know that. Always. From now on."

Loki stared at him. He remembered how hard he had made Thor work to gain him, always. Making him court and flirt for months before their first time - and if Thor hadn't incurred that little injury, it would have been months more. Extorting a promise not to call him ergi at the beginning of their first night, never mind that the term was entirely accurate and Loki knew it. And now testing Thor, testing his love, testing his acceptance of Loki's scars. And Thor was handing himself over with no hesitation and no conditions, because that was how Thor loved people. Oh, not when things were well enough, he would never have pleased Loki on his knees before - before, he never would have made this sweeping offer before, but when the love was threatened, nothing was held back. Ever since Loki had first gone mad, Thor had done everything he could for him - had tried to stop him from wreaking havoc, had protected him from Thor's human allies, had held back every time they fought, had offered time and again to help him repair the damage he had done, had always - irony of ironies - tried to talk Loki into stopping his villainy before engaging in combat.

Loki gave a tiny nod. Thor moved to the bed with no urging and laid on his back. For a long moment Loki just feasted his eyes. Thor should be putting him in his place now, punishing him, rendering him harmless impossible, but he lay back, waiting on Loki's pleasure, his face and his legs open to Loki in Loki's usual posture. He was so beautiful and so trusting that it hurt Loki to see it. How could the brother of Loki Liesmith still be so trusting?
And how could Loki help trusting a man so capable of trust?

Loki put one knee on the edge of the mattress, and his other between Thor's. Thor's lips curved up just a bit and his hands went to rest lightly on Loki's arms, but other than that he simply laid back and let Loki do as Loki liked. What Loki liked happened to be reacquainting his hands and mouth with every inch of Thor's magnificent body, fanning Thor's desire for him, until he could see Thor biting back a plea, still trying to give Loki what he wanted first. That was when Loki finally sank between Thor's thighs, both of them melting with relief. How long had it been since they had done it this way? He couldn't even recall.

It was still like fucking lightning.

Being enclosed so snugly was paradise, Thor's inner muscles around his cock, Thor's arms and legs around his body, Thor's lips around his tongue. Thor was going to absorb him completely until there were no more divisions between them and they never regained the illusion that they were separate.

Thor was watching his face, hungrily absorbing the feelings Loki could not make himself hide. Some liarsmith he was. All it took was a few words, a few kisses, from his infuriating golden glorious brother and all his love and fear and yearning were written on his face.

And Loki had thought putting Thor beneath him would give Loki control of the act. It never had, not really. It only ever made Thor's victory more subtle.

"Without you, Loki," Thor gasped in Loki's ear as they strove together, "I am not whole."

By the Norns. How could Thor say that, how could he think for one instant that he was the one who needed Loki, did he actually believe that nonsense, but of course he did, Thor could not lie to save his life, he believed it like the splendid fool he was-

"I love you," Loki whispered back. It was inadequate, but if he said more he was going to weep.

When it was over he did weep, both of them did. They wound up sitting face to face, arms and legs wrapped around each other as they wept on each other's shoulders for all the grief of the last few years, for the mountains of regret, for the heart-shattering relief of being reunited. The tears were as much an act of communion as the lovemaking. They had no need for words now, everything was understood.

Much, much later, after they had kissed away the traces of each other's tears and were lazily tangling their limbs in preparation for another bout, Loki realized with amazement that he was happy. His sentence of service on Midgard, whatever Odin had in store for him, the ruin of his plans - all of that seemed very trivial just now. This was what mattered, him and Thor, he could relinquish the dizzying freedom life's great lie of supervillainy and the hope of ruling the Nine Realms and the cold sweetness of revenge so long as Thor still loved him this much.

Why, that sly, sneaky, devious schemer of a thunder god. Maybe he had learned a thing or two from Loki after all. His conniving plan was to make Loki so foolishly contented that he caused no more trouble. Pour enough love into him and there might not be room for plotting and power-lust. Of all the duplicitious underhanded tricks to play, and on his own brother. Love - the biggest trick of all, and all the more effective when it wasn't a trick.

Breaking away from him, Loki sat up in the bed and warned, "Do not think that you have tamed me, brother. You never will."

Thor looked at him, then lifted himself up enough to place his hand on the side of Loki's neck and
plant a soft little kiss on Loki's mouth. "Only sometimes. For a little while."
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Thor and Loki return to Asgard. Loki, whose head is still a bag full of cats, continues to scheme.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The following day they entered the throne room of Asgard, a thousand wary eyes on them, marched together to the foot of the dais, and knelt. Thor watched from the corner of his eye, but Loki bent his knee with no visible hesitation.

Odin paused impressively and let the silence stretch before speaking. "Loki Odinson, before we pronounce sentence upon you, have you anything to say in your own defense?"

Loki raised his head calmly and spoke in a carrying voice, and even before the first words were out Thor realized that Odin had blundered terribly in giving Loki this chance to speak.

"As all the Nine Realms now know, I have no right to the honor of that name, save for your generosity, All-Father. I will presume upon that generosity no further. From this day forth, I shall be resigned to be known as Loki Laufeyson."

No Aesir of the court would be so ill-mannered as to speak during an audience, but the gasps filled the room.

"It is I who shall decide who is worthy to be called Odinson," Odin said, trying to regain control of the moment, but Loki turned enough for his eyes to sweep the vast room and spoke again.

"For all the years I believed myself to be the son of Odin, I never wished to inherit Odin's throne - except for a bare handful of days in all those centuries. As the Norns would have it, those few days were the only ones in which it was within my reach. But those days are past." Loki turned back to Odin. "I still do not want it. I hereby formally renounce any place I might be considered to have in the succession to the throne of Asgard."

Thor's shock overwhelmed centuries of training. "Loki, you can't!"

Loki kept his gaze trained on Odin, green eyes blazing with triumph.

Odin was staring at his adopted son, amazement, anger and sorrow all warring on his face. Then he, too, looked around at the vast room, and abruptly Thor could see what he was thinking, almost as if Loki were whispering in his ear. *Loki made this declaration publicly, with no warning, so that Odin could do nothing to stop it. Loki rejected the very things Odin had in his gift, before Odin could offer or deny them, leaving Odin with fewer pieces to play. Loki knows how the Aesir have always distrusted him and now detest him, and has done the one thing which might ease their suspicions and temper their dislike. Whatever Odin had planned, Loki has stolen his thunder.*

The audience was ended and the royal family retreated to more private chambers for a shouting, plate-throwing row. Loki's voice was hot with anger. Never in all their centuries had Thor heard him
speak to their father this way. Always before, it had been Odin and Thor shouting at each other while Loki watched and listened and tried to reason with each of them to make peace. Thor could scarcely believe the furious words his brother, always so careful with his speech, was now flinging at their father, far worse than anything he himself had ever said in the grip of his temper. And Odin, furious and amazed, was nonetheless suffering it.

"Why did you not simply tell me about Thanos and Darkseid and the rest of them? I would have-

"Because you sewed my mouth shut, or have you forgotten that little detail? I tried to tell you! I told you the Chitauri were coming and you didn't listen and they came. You never have listened, not when I told you Thor wasn't ready to be king, not when - not ever! Why should this have been different?"

"So you become a criminal? Terrorize the Nine Realms, because I was insufficiently attentive?"

"I had no desire to follow the fate of Cassandra! And no desire to live in a galaxy of barren rock and cinders."

"So instead you shame your family and your-

Loki's voice grew so in volume that Thor wondered if it were a magic trick of some sort. "Don't you dare! It was you who dragged me into this family and then refused to truly accept me in it, rather than just give your subjects the war with Jotunheim they always craved anyway. When were you planning to put your puppet on the Jotun throne, anyhow?"

"I wanted peace. Peace for all of us."

"I see. So that's why you tried to put your golden warmonger on the throne of Asgard." Loki's voice dripped with sarcasm. Thor winced, even though he knew it was true.

"When the throne fell to you, you did not make peace either, as I-"

"Didn't I? When did the frost giants last cause you any trouble? It will be centuries before they are able to bother anyone!" When the other two stared at him, shocked, Loki waved an impatient hand. "Of course it was a terrible thing to do and I was insane at the time, but nonetheless I did secure the peace and killed the enemy who hated you."

"And then rejected my name to take his?"

"I did it for Thor!" Loki shouted. "I don't want anyone ever thinking I might try to usurp his throne again."

Thor tried to cut in. "Loki, I need no assurance-

"But others do. Asgard does! No one wants me about when there is a danger I might come between Asgard and its beloved crown prince!" For the moment, at least, Loki's tone was not bitter. He sounded as if he considered it proper for Asgard to love Thor - why should it not, when he did? Loki turned back to Odin and stabbed a finger at Thor. "Asgard is his! That's what you've always wanted, and it's what I want and what Thor wants, what all Asgard wants, why are you arguing now that I've removed the only rival claim?"

Odin thundered, "You are calling yourself Laufeyson! Laufey left you to die! I saved your life!"

"One of your more foolish moves, I am certain you realize by now. You're only angry that I shed your name before you could strip me of it!"
"I was not going to - why did you not at least tell me you were going to do this? We could have discussed this!"

"And what are you going to do about it?" Loki challenged, triumphant. "Banish me to Earth? I have to spend the next half century there anyway! Turn me into an ordinary human? You've tried! Imprison me? Good luck keeping me in for one week! Remove me from the succession? I've beaten you to it! You'll have to settle for loving my brother better than you love me - which you always have anyway!"

"Do you still not believe that I love you as much as if you had been my son by blood?"

Loki stared at Odin, incredulous. "Of course I don't believe that, what kind of fool do you think I am!" Odin tried to reply but Loki, incredibly, interrupted. "No, I know that you do love me, but not enough not to have tormented me for centuries making me pursue something I could never have. Not enough to-" Loki stopped, gnashing his teeth, and finally ground out, "Had I known I never had any chance of equaling Thor in your eyes, I could have been spared the anguish of my failures. I have taken my rightful patronym to block any possible path I might still have to Thor's throne. Would they accept a king who calls himself the son of their enemy? Never! I have secured your true son's throne!"

Odin looked weary, and with sudden fear Thor realized that it might not be long before he was indeed finally crowned, that his father would descend into the Odinsleep soon. To think he had once been eager for this.

When Odin finally spoke again, his voice was quiet. "You are right, I have wronged you, Loki." Thor stared, amazed, as Odin groped for words, uncertain for once, and very, very old. "But you are my son and I do love you." Loki only looked at him, his eyes brimming and his jaw clamped. Odin went on softly, "I had no intention of stripping you of my name or of your place in the succession. Your sentence is, when your service on Earth is done, you are to return here and repair the Bifrost."

At once the calculation appeared in Loki's eyes. He bowed his head, accepting the sentence without argument.

"I gave Thor Mjölnir," Odin was going on. "I should not have favored him so far above you."

Frustration fairly burst out of Loki. "I wasn't jealous of his damned hammer, I was afraid it was going to get him killed! It made him think he was invincible and he took stupid risks because of it! I wanted you to take it away from him until he learned more sense!"

Thor thought ruefully that Loki always had behaved as if he were the elder brother, trying to protect Thor from his own folly. "And now?" he asked. "Do you still-"

"He did take it away from you, and it worked. Less than a week without the damned thing and you grew up at once. It doesn't endanger you now," Loki informed him. "Did you not notice I was careful never to stay in prison for long once you came up with the idea of using it to weigh me down? I couldn't stay in a cell when you might need your hammer in battle."

"Oh, I see." Thor grinned despite himself. "You escaped from prison out of consideration for me. How kind."

Odin smiled slightly. "You were perhaps right about Mjölnir, Loki. But I was going to say that I should have given you a gift of comparable value." Loki's eyes shot to him, full of things he was trying to hide. "This is centuries overdue, but come."
Odin turned and headed toward one of the vaults, not the weapons vault, but a somewhat less secure one containing less dangerous magical relics. Loki followed him, eyes wide and face as blank as he could make it. Thor trailed after.

In the vault, Thor stood back and observed as Odin took from one of the cases a gleaming violet crystal on a silver chain. Odin held it up to the light overhead and its facets caught the light and refracted it like one of the lasers Tony Stark used.

"It is useless in the hands of one who does not understand its magic. It requires a skilled practitioner," Odin said, and explained its use while Loki drank in the words with utter concentration. Thor tried to follow but it was like trying to understand Tony and Bruce Banner when they talked about their sorcery that they thought was not sorcery. Too many words and references only the initiated could comprehend. Odin turned the crystal, altering the beam of light which came from it, and said more that went over Thor's head, abruptly breaking off in the midst of a sentence. "You see?" he asked Loki, and Loki nodded and said a few words of magical jargon. Whatever it was, Loki had already grasped more about it than Odin had yet explained.

When Odin's instructions were done, he ceremoniously hung the chain around Loki's neck, and Loki slowly reached up to touch the crystal at last, keeping his eyes down. "What does it do?" Thor asked after a moment. "It is no weapon."

Loki smiled tightly, holding the crystal in his palm, his fingers tense. "Oh, no. It is a powerful magical artifact, but not a weapon. Quite the opposite; with it I can heal grievous wounds beyond the reach of my unassisted magic. Irresistible to me, but something which I can only use for doing good works. Well played, Father." The last word clearly slipped out from habit, and Loki looked angry at himself. After a moment he composed himself and bowed formally. When he spoke his voice was low with suppressed, tangled emotions. "Thank you, All-Father. I am truly grateful for this gift. May I have permission to go?"

Odin sighed. "You may."

Loki turned and left them, his hand closed over the crystal. They both looked after him for a long moment, before Thor turned to Odin and made a clumsy try at his unaccustomed role as peacemaker. "Father - he has been deeply wounded - in time I am certain he will-"

Odin shook his head. "Thor, Loki is beyond my reach now, through my own fault. You are the only one who can bring him back to us."

"I will," Thor said at once. And then admitted, "If I can."

Dismissed, he found Loki on the terrace outside their bedrooms, gazing into the familiar, beautiful landscape, his hand still clenched protectively around the crystal. He looked so bleak that Thor had to put an arm around his waist, and was gratified when Loki unconsciously leaned into him, as he used to. They stood in silence, watching the sunset. Loki's mouth was set in the way it did when he realized that one of his gambits had failed, when he accepted that he had lost.

Except that Loki never really did accept that, because it was not in his nature. This was Loki, who while in the grip of torture by monsters had devised an audacious plan to not only escape, but to defeat the monsters' army, who had spent months in prison rather than reveal that Mjölnir had recognized him as his brother's equal. Who never stayed tame. "Retreat is only another form of advance," Loki had quoted some dusty book to him once, centuries ago. He would always look for ways to wrench victory from defeat, always look for some alternate way to gain what he sought when one way was barred for good.
"We should return to Midgard as soon as we can," Loki said after a bit, resigned. "They will need all the help we can give them. Now that my plans are ruined, they will never be ready in time."

"You of all people should know better than to underestimate humans, brother," Thor chided him.

"You really think they can stand against Thanos or Darkseid?" Loki shook his head slightly. "Not yet. Not for a long while."

"I think they are more prepared than you realize."

After a second, Loki snorted. "Oh, I know Fury's colleagues are trying to plan for Thanos and Darkseid now, but they are not accustomed to such planning. Do you not recall how difficult it was for them to defeat me and the Chitauri, even with your aid? And I was helping them to defeat me! And without that Amazon's lasso, they never would have deduced what I was doing. All they could come up with as explanation was sibling rivalry. As if there weren't easier ways for me to annoy you. They will never be able to outthink the fiends who are coming."

"Do not be so certain. Director Fury was hard at work on trying to understand your activities."

Loki shook his head once, very definite. "He is above the common herd of humans, but he is not nearly so clever as he thinks."

"Perhaps, but he is wise enough to know that he must call on the wisdom of others. Shortly before I besought the Amazon for help, Director Fury told me that some of Midgard's greatest minds were working together to try to understand your objectives. They questioned me that they might better understand you."

Loki's lashes dipped. "Midgard's greatest minds? I suppose that means that iron-clad alcoholic friend of yours and some ancient professor who has never been in an actual battle. Or perhaps a couple of rabble-rousing public servants playing at being kings."

"Not at all. Batman was one of them, and Mycroft Holmes, and several others who I never met but who I am assured had intellects comparable to theirs."

Loki turned penetrating green eyes to him. "Fury was able to gather that many minds of that caliber, just to try to understand me?"

"And not only you. These people have been sharing their wisdom for a few years now, striving to anticipate the activities of their enemies that they might stop them before they...." Thor's voice trailed off, because Loki had completely turned to face him and was staring in what Thor thought was genuine surprise.

"Thor, are you saying that a number of the best brains on Midgard are working together to strategize in preparation for future attacks?"

And there it was. Loki had guessed that there was something to be found out, and had with his usual guile drawn Thor into telling him everything he had been determined to keep secret, all without even asking any questions. "I almost missed your doing that," Thor told him. "Almost."

"And they know, now, about Thanos and Darkseid and the others. Thor, do you think they believe me? Will they take my warnings seriously?"

"Loki, you already knew that SHIELD was working on plans-"

Loki waved an elegant hand. "SHIELD, yes, you know how terribly impressed I am with them."
Why, I would do anything to avoid being taken prisoner on one of their floating fortresses, because I know I could never manipulate them from my cell or escape from it. But this - Thor, do you know what this means?"

Thor thought. "I do not know what it means to you."

"It means I have succeeded!" Loki turned to the horizon again, and Thor could see tension flowing out of him. "Oh, there is much still to be done, but I have goaded the humans into not only using their brains, but uniting their best brains in trying to anticipate instead of merely react. Your precious Earth might yet be safe, brother."

"Loki, you are arrogance incarnate."

"It runs in the family." His brother was smiling now, not one of his charming smiles or taunting smiles, but a small, happy smile of relief. And after a minute, Thor could almost see the beginnings of speculation and planning in his brother's pensive gaze.

Looking out at the familiar landscape of the land he had known as his home, Loki let his thoughts range free. Nearly all of his plans were unsalvageable, but he had near-immortality to form new ones. He had carefully refrained from forming any backup plans for what he would do if his brother ever dragged him back to the Amazon's lasso, lest he be forced to reveal them. He could make his new plans now. Tomorrow he would spend with his mother, the blessed woman who had not loved him less for not being Thor. She was the only one he felt deserved an apology from him for... everything. And then back to Midgard. Back to fifty years of tagging along for Thor's sort of adventure with Thor's friends who would tolerate him only out of loyalty to Thor. All Loki had done and he was back to this again.

No, that would never do. He would have to form his own alliances among the heroes. Seek out those with darkness in their hearts which would recognize the darkness in his own and form a bond between them. Batman would have been an obvious choice, but he was too clever and, more importantly, too suspicious for it to work. Besides, he was Iron Man's lover, his loyalties were already pledged. But there were so many of these little human heroes, so many of them who were trying to rip the pain out of their own hearts and hurl it at someone who deserved it like him no not like him but yes like him and he would find them. And the ones who were heroes because the benevolence in their own hearts was so powerful that they could not believe it could not transform the entire galaxy, his brother and Kal-El and the Amazon and the supersoldier and countless others, well, he knew how to handle them. He had centuries of hands-on practice. Throw them a few bones of gratitude and admiration and they would elbow each other aside for their turn at trying to redeem him. Well, not the soldier, perhaps. He wasn't quite as naïve as he appeared. But the others, oh, yes. He would win all of them over and they would overrule the ones who remained suspicious, and they would be right, up to a point.

And Midgard was not so infatuated with brute strength and foolish courage as was Asgard. Loki would make himself indispensable, oh, he would be so useful. There would be delicious moments, after a few years of his charade not entirely a charade, when the heroes of Midgard came to him, not his brother, for help - they had plenty of ridiculously strong and brave people, sometimes nothing would do but guile and magic. Of course you can come along too, Thor, you can swing your hammer at any baddies who try to interfere while your brother works magic. And Loki would not stoop to smirk about it, he would be gracious and pretend not to have noticed that their roles had been reversed.

There were so many little things that had to be done. The crystal - if Odin thought he would win him
back with trinkets, even marvelous ones like this, he was far too late why didn't he give him this before before it would have been more than all the Nine Realms to Loki before he would have crawled like a pup in gratitude before. No one could give Loki the things he wanted any longer; now he had to take them. Still he was itching to try it out. The Son of Coul would be the first he used it on, he decided; Agent Coulson still had to visit Midgard's bumbling healers often because of lingering complications from the time Loki had run him through idiot had only himself to blame offered himself as a sacrifice stupid brave stupid noble. Coulson and Fury alike had had no qualms about letting their heroes believe he was dead to motivate them, the very sort of trick people always criticized Loki for hypocrites. Still, it seemed suitable to heal someone he himself had wounded, and the heroes he must now fight alongside would be pleased. And perhaps he would not quite so often have to chase the thoughts of those he had killed, those he had wounded, out of his mind lest the remorse even a monster feels remorse drive him back to madness and put him in the grip of evil once more. Perhaps enough good works would wipe a little bit of the red out of his ledger that much red cannot be wiped out the horrors were a part of him would never go away.

No. He must think of his plans. There was the Amazon to be contended with, as well. A pity her race was immortal. She would always be around, with her dangerous lasso. Unless someone else took care of her for him with no prompting from him, he was going to have to befriend the princess, make a show of not entirely feigned gratitude that she had helped save his soul from evil-doing and reunite him with his beloved. She might not be quite naïve enough to trust him, but he could make her like him. She was just like his brother, without Thor's advantages of having known him for centuries and seen him at his worst. Playing her would be simple, making her fond enough of him to hesitate to use her golden rope against him. And if she ever did, well, his magic grew all the time. He could learn to resist the lasso, one day.

The Midgardians were fools. They should have let him continue with what he was doing, it was in their own best interests. Someone was going to have to take Midgard in hand. It certainly wasn't going to be Loki, the wretched realm had always been more trouble than it was worth. Full of Ph.D.'ed harlots lying in wait to prey upon hapless not-overbright demigods in vulnerable emotional states. It had been more manageable back in the old days when gods visited it regularly, real gods like the Olympians and ersatz ones like the Aesir, to keep the humans humble. They had become overconfident over the centuries of being left on their own without encountering their betters. Might be best if some pantheon or other took the literally godforsaken realm in hand, if Loki could find one willing to assume the thankless task.

Loki had often thought of reclaiming Asgard, but never made up his mind to do it. He had seen a dozen paths to doing so, before he had blocked them off today, but Thor. Asgard belonged to Thor and Thor belonged to Loki. Loki still had not bedded a king, or been bedded by one, and he still meant to do both, one day. And when he did Thor would be a wise king, because Loki had made him wise succeeded where Odin failed Asgard would owe Thor's wise rule to Loki all to Loki, with more success than he had ever dreamed that day when he had let those frost giants into the weapons vault of Asgard. No matter how wrong Loki's schemes went, he usually did succeed, in the end.

The realms would need a leader, however, in the aftermath of the coming war, and during it. He had long been planning towards gathering several alien armies. All of them would have believed they were aligning to conquer Midgard and a couple of other realms, but he would not have permitted them to move into position to attack until the real danger was imminent. Instead of conquering Midgard they would have found themselves defending it, at his command, and in no shape to cause undue trouble after the battle was won. And then he would have saved the realms from destruction, and whatever he wanted would be his.

This plan might yet be adapted to present circumstances. It was why he had demanded ambassadorships, and even though the humans had balked at that, he had his foot in the door and
from there he could get almost anywhere. But how to make the realms accept his authority when the time came, now that his scheme had been exposed, that was an intriguing puzzle.

Abruptly he wrenched his serpentine mind out of its accustomed grooves of the last few years. He had meant it when he had told Thor he had never wanted the throne. He hadn't, until, as he was reeling from learning that he was a Jotun a monster never a chance at being loved as much as Thor golden Thor perfect Thor, Gungnir was placed into his hands. It had been a heady balm to his shattered soul, a chance to make everything right I am a worthy son the son of Odin not Laufey's never Laufey's. And that kind of power, a crown, kneeling subjects that bit of the Chitauri invasion had actually been rather fun, a throne - not many truly thought they wanted these things until a path to them showed itself, and then, then only a saint could refuse. A saint or a fool.

Since then he had planned to have it again. Not with the help of the Chitauri, they were monsters and would have killed him as soon as they had the Tesseract and he owed them vengeance and had had it they were all dead dead crushed like the vile insects they were. But he had already had half-formed plans for after that, even as he had entered Midgard shaking and in pain but with the sceptre in his hand. No matter how perfect his plans for preparing the Nine Realms for defending themselves from Darkseid and Thanos and the rest, the war would cause devastation. And he would have been in command of the army that had saved them. He would have ruled them all, every realm, hundreds of worlds kneeling to him.

It had been a pleasant fantasy for years now, what he comforted himself with as he lay next to a sleeping man or woman who was not Thor, and tried not to think about his not-father, and ran out of unpleasant epithets to apply to Jane Foster. But now, the plans seemed like the most weighty of burdens. As if he were now their servant rather than they his. As if, because the daydreams about them were sweet, he was now sentenced to exhaust and endanger himself bringing them into reality.

No more. There were better games to play.

He had spent so long measuring himself against Thor, trying to be the natural leader Thor was, not content to follow his brother as everyone else had done, that he had never realized his nature was not that of a weaker leader than Thor, but of a man who went his own way. That he had little more desire to shackle himself to subordinates than to masters not for very long.

He would continue to expand his magic. He had always intended to, after saving the realms. He would journey through every one of the realms, learning to harness all the magics of the cosmos. He would become the most powerful sorcerer in the entire universe, greater than Odin or Fate or any of them Odin was too powerful could deprive Thor of his strength and immortality at any moment one day Loki would surpass him and Asgard would be Thor's alone. Loki might even find magical means to defend the realms, and then, well, then. Think of the possibilities.

Yes, now he could see about having a bit of fun.

He would placate the humans his brother by carrying out his fifty years of service, but he would use that service as the foundation of his own aims; one selfless hero in the family was enough. He would play the hero for now, but he was not one, any more than he was truly a villain; he was simply Loki, the trickster, bringer of chaos, God of Mischief. He would play the roles others created only when they suited his own purposes.

Even the repair of the Bifrost could be turned to his own advantage. The task should take him a century at least, a fact he was certain Odin had taken into account. The sentence was supposed to keep him too busy to cause trouble for a long time. But Loki's magic was expanding by leaps and bounds, unfettered since he had left Asgard. By the time his half-century on Midgard was up, he would have found a way to rebuild the rainbow bridge quickly the outrage on Odin's face would be
He was done with useless struggling to gain favor that would never be granted. Henceforth he would do what he wanted. Never again would he do anything to please another.

With one exception, but even he would have to work for it.

Loki would not deny himself petty revenge, or joyful reconciliation. Thor was going to try to restore his sanity, his goodness what goodness he had ever had. Thor would shower him with love and respect and hope it would reform him. It might even work. A little bit. Or a lot, with a twisted soul like Loki's even Loki could not be certain. But he would use Thor's generous affection, yes he would, would all but drown himself in it. He and Thor would again have what they used to every precious bit of it. They would tease each other about their helmets and bicker over silly things and laugh and kiss as they always had - when Loki didn't feel like fighting with him instead; he would bask in Thor's sunlight, but he would never again consent to be his shadow. He would fight at Thor's side when it suited him. He would share Thor's bed, when it suited him - which would be almost every night. Once again he would writhe in that powerful grip, absorb his brother's light into himself, allow all that radiance to flood through him, burning out all within him that was dark and cold at least for a few minutes. Their shared bed would be yet another arena for his games, now he would play all the games with his brother that he had never dared to play in the old days, on Asgard where he had kept himself muzzled.

Now, he would bite, when it suited him. Thor would find that their bed was not always a refuge, sometimes it would be a minefield.

Loki had no doubt that Thor loved him. That did not mean he did not need it proven. Again and again.

On Asgard, his favorite way to couple had been on his back, his legs wrapped around Thor. But now, after the Bifrost and Thanos and the Hulk and all the hours he had spent in prison with that damned hammer weighing him down - the next time Thor gently pressed him back onto a mattress as he had a thousand thousand times before, Loki would shove him angrily away. And when Thor, full of concern and hurt, asked what he had done wrong, Loki would snarl that he had spent enough time on his back. It would not be a lie at all, the thought of lying on his back beneath Thor again filled him as much with terrifying memories as with desire. Perhaps he would spend the rest of that night alone, far away, comforted in his loneliness by the knowledge that his brother was lonely and miserable too. The next day he would accept Thor's apology and perhaps bend him over for their reunion, or perhaps put him on his knees at Loki's feet where Thor belonged always always and they would both weep with joy at being together again and Loki's tears would be every bit as sincere as Thor's.

And on some later night, when he felt especially contented sentimental, he would suddenly lie back on the bed and pull his brother between his legs, and Thor would see this as an act of forgiveness and would be so filled with joy that it would become true, it would dissolve a tiny part of Loki's grudge but still leave him mountains of it to play with.

He had Thor back. He would have everything he had ever wanted not quite, someday. One day crowds would cheer for him as they had for Thor at his interrupted coronation. Not on Asgard, but somewhere. Even if he were cast down the next moment, he would have had it. After he was done with his show of contrition on Earth which would be quite a lark really and rebuilt the Bifrost, perhaps he would find some besieged planet and lead it to glorious victory against its attackers, pretend to be like Thor for a while. Tony Stark was able to convince his allies that he barged in without thinking like a proper hero should, winning on the basis of guts and virtue untainted by such
sordid things as strategy, when actually his every move was meticulously planned. Loki could play that trick, on a far grander scale. It would be a splendid jape. And after he grew bored with their adulation and left them to their own devices and their fond memories of him (which he would leave blessedly intact, for centuries after they would strike down anyone who dared speak ill of him to them after all he had done for them), he would wear whatever regalia they had seen fit to decorate him with for the rest of eternity, that none would ever forget that he, too, could do what Thor did, when he had a mind to.

A few things were out of reach even for him, he knew that. He would never be the favorite son, had never had any chance to be. He had been a pawn intended to make peace between Asgard and Jotunheim. Well, so be it. Whatever Odin had planned a tame puppet king on the Jotun throne had never come to pass, but he was the rightful king of the frost giants. Getting them to accept a foreign-raised runt of a regicide, who had attempted the destruction of their realm to boot, would be a pretty trick, one that might take a century or more to pull off. The very thought of the machinations the feat would require gave him a secret little thrill of glee. His brother's poor allies would wrack their brains to divine his purpose! Adopting his rightful patronymic was only the very first tiny step. And since everyone in the Nine Realms knew that he had killed Laufey, the name was a reminder to everyone of just how far he was willing to go. He was a kinslayer, a man capable of killing his own father. And once he had claimed his own rightful throne met Thor as his equal king to king he would create a lasting peace, one which would last for millennia. "Have you ever bedded a king, Thor? Or been bedded by one?" he would ask him, and they would do both before the night was out, both in their crowns, their sceptres beside the bed. Asgard would be grateful against its own will. Odin might never love him as much as he loved the son of his own blood, but he would have to admit that Loki had served his purpose on his own terms in his own way with no credit at all to Odin. And once the peace was secure, perhaps he would walk away from his hard-won throne, just to show everyone who coveted one that he was above their petty desires. And after that-

Thor jostled him out of his thoughts with a heavy, affectionate hand on the side of his neck, the old caress he used to give all the time, that for years Loki had feared he might never receive again, and Loki met those eyes that made the summer sky blush for shame. And for just that moment, Loki had all he wanted in the universe. For a few eternal seconds, he was as simple and happy as Thor, with no contrary venom in his heart. And then the seconds were over and he was himself again, savoring that possessive touch and resenting it and thinking of how he might turn it to his advantage.

"Whatever you are scheming, brother, forget about it."

Loki pretended to consider this for a moment, and then he nodded as if he were merely agreeing to another cup of mead. "Very well. I will not scheme anymore."

They looked at each other, steady gazes summing each other up, and together they laughed.

Chapter End Notes

And the fic is finished! Thank you so much, all of you who've stuck with me this long. I really appreciate the comments and kudos and encouragement I've gotten!

There will be sequels set in this same fictional universe. The way I'm planning it now, most of them will probably be fairly short, not novella-length like this one.

This will be my big Loki apology fic. I expect he'll always be sympathetic in any stories
I write about him, but some of the ones I'm working on in different fictional universes will not make nearly as many excuses for him as this one does. If you care to read a rant about why I felt the need to justify him so much, you can find it at my writing tumblr.

End Notes

This fic would not have been possible if not for xparrot's brilliant meta about Loki's Xanatos Gambit during the Avengers movie.

My beta reader and partner in fannish crime Grey Bard was an invaluable source of information about comics canon for me, especially Marvel canon, which I know very little about. She is also the one who made me sit down and watch Thor to begin with. Of course, she was trying to educate me in Avengers canon so I'd join her on the Steve/Tony ship. Oops. Also, she deserves tons of credit for her patience with silly jokes about horses and pseudo-incest.

Grey Bard and Omlteaufromage both very patiently offered all kinds of suggestions for details of supporting characters or of Loki's assorted schemes. Also they very kindly put up with my trancelike state when Loki poked me in the chest with his Glowstick of Destiny [TM] and made me write this fic.

Grey Bard, Omlteaufromage, Anne-Li and Heather Sparrows betaed this fic and made it far better than it otherwise would have been.

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